

Vietnam to the World, a Magical Connection:
'Embers of Time' (a novel) and 'Bridging Disparate
Realms' (an exegesis)

Ngoc Thu Hoang

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Adelaide, November 2017.

For my mother, Nguyễn Thị Nhị Nga

Abstract

The thesis comprises a novel and an exegesis. The novel, ‘Embers of Time’, is inspired by a Vietnamese fable. Beginning in 1830, the story follows two young men, Luru and Nguyễn, who embark on a hunting trip from their village in Vietnam’s northern highlands. Lost overnight in the forest, they meet a group of young women in the morning and spend a day in an otherworldly Realm. Returning at nightfall, the friends discover they have been away for a hundred years, during which the French have invaded and occupied their homeland. Gone are their family and friends, their language and culture, their work and future expectations, while the many French-introduced changes are as alienating to the young men as the French themselves. Reduced to outsiders in their own country, Luru and Nguyễn are forced to defend their family names and history. For the friends, returning home is just the beginning of a new journey in a foreign land.

The exegesis, ‘Bridging Disparate Realms’, is a cross-cultural exploration of comparable ways of living and modes of expression, such as those represented under the broad banner of Magical Realism. The thesis explores the personal, historical, cultural and literary background that informed my creative process and investigates disparities between English and Vietnamese literary traditions. The latter are grounded in an ancient culture built over four thousand years with distinct linguistic features and cultural and religious practices shaped by specific historical and political conditions. These are often culturally untranslatable, as recognised by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, among other critics and writers. Adapting Magical Realism narrative devices and creating new tools have been conducive to my attempt at bridging intrinsically different traditions and conventions in writing the novel. The particular influence of Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is examined in relation to the development of my creative work, while Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*, Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*, Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria*, David Malouf’s *An Imaginary Life* and Chi Vu’s novella *Anguli Ma: A Gothic Tale* serve as additional illuminating examples of the power of literature to connect cultures and peoples, helping to locate ‘Embers of Time’ within a broader literary framework.

‘Embers of Time’

A novel

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Chapter 1: Obscure Threats and Non-believers

At last, the much-anticipated day had arrived. It was the Tenth Day of the Seventh Lunar Month in the summer of 1830.

Luru got up at the first bird's call. It was still dark inside but there was already a warm tinge to the grey outside his window. He was ready in the shortest time possible and had completed almost half of his night's work, grinding roots and medicinal herbs, by the time he left for his house calls. Pleased with an effective start to the day, he was confident that he would be able to finish the remaining work after the midday rice, forgoing his afternoon nap, and would have wrapped up his day's work by his last visit, earning himself a free night to attend the much awaited meeting.

Nguyễn had also started his day before dawn and forgone his noon break, completing the bulk of his work by mid-afternoon. By the time he had put in the finishing touches and packed away the newly made furniture, carved doors and a dining table, the bright glow outside his veranda had already softened into a peach pink hue. Pleased with a productive day that was for once without any disruption, he cleaned up quickly and had a wash before joining his family for the night rice, anticipating Luru's arrival soon after.

*

It was early evening in Tĩnh Vân village at the foothills of the Fansipan Mountain.

Perching on top of the ranges, the fat gibbous moon cast swathes of transparent yellow over the mountain's shoulders. Birds wheeled in fluid sheets above terraced rice fields before disappearing into purple shadows between the ridges. Their calls mingled with happy noises from children washing themselves along the river banks, and the chatter of farmers guiding laden ox carts along dirt tracks, coming home from their harvest.

Light sprouted from homes, followed by aromas of cooked rice and grilled food wafting through the windows. The shadows had barely settled, when bubbles of torch-light appeared on the streets, amassing as the procession moved from home to home. Men young and old were as excited as children with lanterns during Tết Trung Thu, the mid-Autumn Fullmoon Festival. The village's arteries were alive with torches snaking their way toward Đình Làng, their dancing flames illuminating faces of eager men heading to the meeting at the Grand Hall.

*

Luru strode past the wide ironwood gate into Nguyễn's garden. Beyond the evergreen hedge, the ripe afternoon heat mellowed under layers of tree canopy, carrying a rich bouquet of fruits and flowers at their peak. Dashing along the wide path, he bounced up the stairs two steps at a time to the great house's front verandah.

‘Nguyễn ơi!’ He called and waited impatiently by the wide polished door.

In the waning light, Luru's eyes roved over the luxuriant garden, catching pink clusters of bell-shaped wax jambu, fat green-yellow starfruits, purple globes of milkfruits and brown sapodillas partly hidden in the deep green foliage. Pendulous pomegranates in muted red competed with the orange hues of mangoes, papayas and persimmons. Taking lungfuls of the luscious summer scents, he picked up his favourite: guava. He could almost taste the crunchy white flesh encasing the creamy pink core.

The sound of brisk footfalls approaching reclaimed his attention. The left door panel swung open and Nguyễn's face appeared in the grey gap.

‘Hey!’ He beamed and stepped out. ‘Let's go!’

*

Luru and Nguyễn were both twenty years of age and might have passed as fraternal twins. Luru was tall with wiry limbs, fair skinned and wavy hair framing his oval face. Nguyễn was taller, dark and powerfully built. Everything about him gave the impression of squareness: his wide shoulders, muscular chest, broad forehead and sharply angled jaw; even his head with its close-cut coarse black hair appeared square.

The friends' families marvelled at the young men's seemingly opposite yet remarkably compatible personalities. Luru was reflective but eloquent, while Nguyễn was direct and blunt. Yet they had been inseparable since they had first played together on the steps of Nguyễn's house, when Luru's father, the village physician, took him on visits to treat Nguyễn's sickly mother. Over the years, the friends had shared countless hours in childhood games and activities: climbing trees and enjoying freshly picked fruits from Nguyễn's rampant garden, collecting firewood and berries, and playing in the hills. Their bond had strengthened as they grew, with fishing, trekking and occasional hunting added to their common interests. Luru was completing his medical training, soon to succeed his father. Nguyễn had also followed his family's tradition and had been an established carpenter for some years. He was working on a large order for a new home.

Cutting across the darkening garden, the friends emerged into the moon's pale light shining through gaps in the bamboo thicket. The sky was high and clear. Luru's heart soared to the stars nudging one another for space on the indigo plain stretching beyond the horizon. The

Great and Little Bears, the Hound, the Swan, the Serpents and the Dragon among lesser stars gathered around the Herdsman. The Wolf, the Lion, the Peacock and the Crow had drifted away, already eclipsed by the rising moon.

‘So two, three veterans, huh?’

Nguyễn’s voice jolted Luru’s attention back to the meeting. Remembering the unexpected incident at the market earlier, he knew he must warn Nguyễn before they reached the Hall. Still unsure of how he would approach the topic, he welcomed the distraction of Nguyễn’s question based on what had been circulating among their friendship group about who should be picked for the hunting team.

‘If they volunteer ...’ Luru agreed but did not bank on the speculation.

‘How about young people?’

‘More, I guess, but there are also more people for us to compete with.’

‘Not just *anyone* can volunteer, right?’ Nguyễn persisted. ‘Their merits, records... must be taken into account ...’

‘I think so.’

Nguyễn grabbed Luru’s arm.

‘We’ve got a chance, haven’t we?’ His eyes were equally eager and anxious as they searched Luru’s face.

‘I’d say ... *yees*. It depends ...’

‘On what?’

‘Hmm... team size? Preference?’ Luru looked away. ‘Who knows what might be required?’

Nguyễn relented. They resumed walking. Silently, Nguyễn itemised again their hunting successes: a mountain goat, an antelope, two deer, some feral sows and rabbits. They had also shared in some group hunting for bear and large cats, but he dismissed these since they had only played minor roles. *Most of our friends did less*, he consoled himself.

‘We’ve had a few good scores. Not *big*, but ... reasonable catches, right?’ Nguyễn’s voice rose enthusiastically above the cicadas’ chirrups.

‘Yep,’ Luru grinned, ‘thanks to your ... ahem... hunting prowess.’ He raised his brows and tipped his head in a mock bow.

Nguyễn took it good-humouredly, his face brightened.

‘They’d remember?’

‘I’d hope so,’ Luru laughed. ‘Wouldn’t mind jogging their memories a bit, would you?’

Nguyễn chuckled and shook his head, seeing how Luru had, once again, seemed to have worn clogs in his guts, đi guốc trong bụng, read his mind.

As they walked on, the moon cleared the treetops, illuminating striped lizards zipping across the dusty track, and speckled frogs springing in and out of shrubs. Among the open fields, Luru breathed in the scents of ripe rice and freshly cut stalks from bales laid out to dry along the embankments. He'd always loved walking through the terraced rice paddies, noticing how they changed with each season, almost with each day. *The smells – he thought – are what set this place apart.* The friends passed the last open field and entered the main road. Luru slowed down. There was not much time left. Luru glanced across at Nguyễn, who seemed deep in thought. Uneasy about what he must alert his friend to, Luru took a big breath.

‘Nguyễn này,’ he said, taken aback by how loud his voice sounded, ‘there’s something ...’

Nguyễn slowed and looked at him expectantly.

‘I overheard today that you ... shouldn’t be selected —’

‘What?’ Nguyễn pulled him over. ‘Who? When was this?’

‘At the market this afternoon. They said you’d be a threat —’

‘Wh...why would I —’

‘Not what you’d do. It’s just you being ... you know ...’

‘Being what?’

‘A great-grandson ...’

‘What’s *that* got to do with anything?’

Luru swallowed.

‘So?’

‘So ...’ Luru inhaled sharply, ‘they said you’d bring the *curse* to the party —’

Nguyễn’s hand tightened on Luru’s arm. *There’s more*, Luru wanted to say.

‘That’s a ... stupid myth since ... before my father...’ Nguyễn looked at his feet. ‘Why would anyone dig that up?’

‘We’ll find out soon enough,’ Luru said curtly, flicking his head toward the Đình Làng.

The Grand Hall was already shining like a beacon on top of the hill, lit from within and all around. Perched on hardwood trunks over stone slabs, with large red-brown panels and windows on all sides, it was visible from every direction. Nguyễn’s mind raced to the thumping of their feet on the cobbled paths, gathering scraps of what he had heard of the ‘curse’ on his

family. It was close to starting time when they arrived at the Hall's eastern staircase. Chatter filtered down from the windows and balconies. Lưu pulled Nguyễn aside.

'Let me ... speak first ...' He spoke quickly between breaths. 'If necessary ...'

Nguyễn blinked. He was remembering his parents' shuttered bedroom, watching his ailing mother's face ease into a crinkly smile at eight-year-old Lưu's promise to keep them safe on their first unsupervised fishing trip. And, another time at his friend's home, when they were thirteen, Lưu's words had smoothed his father's furrowed brow and restored calmness to his mother's eyes before their first hunting trip. Lưu's gentle persuasion was one of many strengths that Nguyễn could count on. He nodded.

The pair scaled the staircase and passed through the main entrance facing the Guardians' altar. Scanning the crowd, they found their friends at the Hall's southern end. Lưu prickled at the sight of Bách among the group. Tall, muscular and domineering in both his physique and manner, Nguyễn's older cousin had never relinquished any opportunity to claim the centre of attention. In his late twenties, Bách was at least five years older than other group members, and had had twice as many years of hunting experience.

There had always been tension between the cousins as far as Lưu could remember. Throughout his younger years, Nguyễn had been incensed by Bách's sneering and belittling their cousins and friends, and had often fought back, ineffectually, even when he was only half Bách's height. Since he had turned fifteen and matched Bách in both height and strength, Nguyễn had become his primary target. Bách's abusive insistence on imposing his authority over the minor cousin, who was required by tradition to obey him, had badly torn the fabric of their kinship.

Nguyễn pushed ahead towards the group. Lưu followed, weaving through the packed room, his eyes fixed on Nguyễn's spiky head. The scenes in the market flashed through his mind: Bách's vindictive face; his rant punctuated by 'kill' and 'curse'. Guilt chafed Lưu; his omission had left Nguyễn open to Bách's traps.

Bách was making a rousing speech when they arrived at the group. Jabbing his forefinger into the air, he bawled.

'That's what going to happen. Mark my word!'

Bách stopped short as all faces turned to Nguyễn. Lưu dragged his friend aside just as three booms from the great gong sounded.

Silence settled in the packed room as five Elders gathered in a row in front of the altar. They bowed in unison at the pure, high note from the bronze chuông floating over the assembly. The Eldest, Old Giang, in the middle, lit a handful of incense sticks. Holding the incense at his brow, he prayed to the Guardians for their guidance and protection on the villagers' forthcoming

hunt. Listening to reverent prayer, while breathing in the heartwarming fragrance of trầm hương filtering through the Hall, the men surrendered themselves to the sacred scent carrying hints of vanilla, cinnamon, oriental woods and lilies. Old Giang planted the incense sticks into the lư hương and, at the cue of a soft chime, led the participants prostrating themselves, each man rested his forehead on upturned palms. The assembly rose at two muted chimes, bowed and settled into rows on the floor; while the Elders joined in a namaskar, backed away from the altar and turned to face the crowd.

Old Giang, an august figure in his seventies with white hair and strong grey brows, spoke to the assembly.

‘We come together tonight to decide on many things.’ His resounding voice reached to the far corners of the Hall. He paused, taking in the expectant faces in the crowd, noting the young men at the southern end of the Hall.

‘Hunting has always been our passion. It’s not our way to make plans or to nominate people for expeditions, but in light of past and recent incidents, we cannot afford to have further unrest or injuries ...’ His voice weakened, paused for a moment. ‘We need to work together to plan as much for ... safety as success.’

Unable to see from the distance, Luru could imagine the pain in Old Giang’s eyes as it broke his voice. He knew the Eldest’s mind would be on his grandson, Quân, a valued member of their close circle of friends.

Unbidden, images of Quân’s bloodied body flooded his mind. Luru could smell again the metallic tang that stuck in his throat and nose for days after he had worked to save Quân at the makeshift shelter at the foothill. When a white-faced youngster had reached him with news that Quân had been mortally wounded, Luru had fled there at an unrepeatable speed with his father’s bag. Knowing his friend would not survive the blood loss if carried any further, Luru had worked frantically to stem the flow from the hole in Quân’s stomach. Quân had drifted in and out of consciousness. There were other wounds on his torso and leg. His crushed shin had to be strapped and his mangled arm had to be amputated. By the time Luru’s father arrived, he had done all he could. Turning away from Quân’s motionless body and his father’s kind eyes, he had walked off and retched behind a bush.

Raised voices around the Hall brought Luru back to the present. Amid raging debates on the right and wrong ways of hunting the dangerous hogs, he could hear the names of hunters, some of whose maimed bodies he had tended with his father; most had survived but some didn’t. Disoriented by the clamour, Luru was shocked by a vision of a man with a torn chest. The

contours of the torso, shoulders and neck were startlingly familiar. His breath stuck in his throat, when he recognised the frozen stare on the lifeless face: it was Nguyễn's.

A chime cut through Luru and shook him as if he had been speared on the spot. The arguing stopped. Everyone's focus was again on the Elders. Old Giang waited for complete silence.

'We have decided on a hunting party of around a dozen people.' His steady voice betrayed no emotion. He raised his hand and waited again for the buzz of excitement to settle down.

'The party will be made up of small teams, each with a leader. You will nominate and vote for the leaders, who will choose their own members.' He smiled benevolently. 'We will also seek the Guardians' wisdom and approval on your selections.'

Old Giang stepped back and Old Nam came forward. Standing at least half a head taller than his peers, the Chief Hunter was a commanding presence with a narrow face and fierce eyes softened by thinning grey hair. In his sixties, he was still robust and as powerfully built as men half his age. Luru knew he had been convalescing from a recent illness and wondered if he would take part in the hunting party. Old Nam surveyed the room.

'We'll need three or four team leaders.' His words rang with authority in the distinct sharp accent of highlanders. 'You can come forward if you are fit, or nominate someone capable.'

It was clear the Chief Hunter had already spotted potential candidates in the crowd. Four men stood up: three young men and Uncle Long, the village's most active hunter. Bow-legged and of average height, he looked barely older than the other three, despite his fifty-plus years, with his smooth brown skin and glossy hair. Speaking cheerfully in his rounded southern accent, he volunteered to be a leader and nominated one of the standing men as a team member.

The selection process progressed rapidly with loud barracking that eased temporarily when a successful candidate stepped forward. In the time it took to finish a cup of tea, four elected leaders, including Bách, knelt at the altar. Each man in turn presented himself to the Guardians and proceeded to toss two copper coins in a wooden bowl: approval was granted if the coins showed different faces. One man was replaced by a new nominee. The newly approved leaders gathered to intone a short prayer to the Guardians before turning back to face the assembly.

Bách, the youngest of the selected leaders, was invited first to pick his team members. He swaggered forward, posing imperiously and scanning the crowd with narrowed eyes. Luru suppressed his annoyance at the theatrical display, curious to see what Bách would do as centre

of the crowd's attention. Directing his gaze at the group that included Luru and Nguyễn, Bách savoured the attention, tormenting expectant peers with his deliberation.

'Hoá and Danh,' he announced, flicking his head at his two offsidiers.

Silence, solidified by collective disbelief, was shattered, when Quang sprang to his feet.

'How about Nguyễn? He's no less capable than *you*!'

A raft of voices joined Quang, Nguyễn's neighbour and family friend.

'He's right. Why not Nguyễn?'

'Your cousin, man! Who'd be a better choice?'

'He's a gutsy hunter!'

'I'd say better than the other two combined. They're only good for carrying your things and serving drinks!'

Laughter broke out amid the furore. Old Giang raised his hand until the protests subsided and turned to the team leaders, fixing his eyes on Bách.

'You can choose more than two members for your team.' He glanced toward Luru and Nguyễn.

Bách averted his eyes. Nguyễn stood up as Hoá and Danh rose and moved forward.

'I'd join your team,' Nguyễn volunteered.

'And I,' Luru stood up.

All eyes were now on Bách. Silence hung in the Hall like a ripe pawpaw on a flimsy stalk. Old Giang surveyed the crowd. Not a sound. Satisfied, he nodded at the waiting friends, diffused the tension with a smile.

'No objections. Nguyễn and Luru, you two can join Bách's team.'

'No!' Bách snapped. 'They *can't*.' His voice was low and menacing.

Luru turned to Nguyễn. 'Leave it to me,' he whispered but stopped short and stared behind Nguyễn. Baffled, Nguyễn followed Luru's eyes: Bách was leaning over to Old Giang, speaking in his ear.

Nguyễn sprang forward.

'Why?' He faced Bách. 'Why can't I join your team?' He breathed fast.

Bách stared expectantly at Old Giang, who did not speak. Thrown, he turned and motioned to his offsidiers nearby. Hoá and Danh flew into a frantic low-voiced exchange, casting frightened looks in the cousins' direction. Nguyễn caught fragments of their sparring: 'didn't tell' ... 'can't make me' ... 'speak better' ...; his face hardened, a deep line appeared between his brows. He glared at Bách, speechless with fury.

'Get on with it,' someone shouted from the back.

‘Shorn of your tongue, Bách?’

‘Coward!’

Hoá stepped forward on unsteady legs. The crowd quietened down to his feeble throat-clearing distorted by his rapid breathing.

‘Nguyễn can’t join us, because...’ Hoá fished for suitable words, his pleading eyes ignored by Bách. Cornered, he threw Nguyễn a hateful look but met an enraged face. Panicked, he turned to Danh, who elbowed him to go on.

‘Nguyễn can’t join us, because he’s ... he’ll bring bad luck to the party.’

‘Why?’

‘How?’

‘Giờ à!’

Hoá scrambled for bits he could recall from Bách’s ranting in the afternoon, bracing himself with his clenched fists.

‘He’s ... his family is *cursed*.’ The last word was muffled as if seized by a sob.

Nguyễn turned abruptly to Hoá. ‘You tell *me* about my family,’ he ordered.

Hoá flinched, the colour drained from his face. He looked to Bách, but to no avail. Hoá avoided Nguyễn’s eyes, speaking instead into his chest.

‘It was said that you ... um ... your family has been cursed since ... since your great-grandfather killed a wild hog.’

Shouts erupted. Front-row men sprang to their feet, forming a semicircle around the leaders.

‘Nonsense.’ Luru interjected loudly for everyone in the Hall to hear. ‘It’s a myth.’

Hoá shoved Danh, who scowled but his face crumpled on seeing it was his turn. Unprepared, Danh grappled with Bách’s treacherous words and collected some for his defence, but Luru had already gained the crowd’s attention.

‘It’s a rumour, without substance,’ Luru announced authoritatively.

‘There *is*,’ Danh interjected, turning red. He inhaled, lowered his pitch and started again. ‘There *is* evidence ... *lots* of evidence.’

Nguyễn faced Danh. ‘What are you saying?’ His deep voice shook with anger.

Danh cowered, angled for Bách’s help but received instead a withering look.

‘You said *all* of the attacked men were *his* relatives.’ Danh screeched, pointing at Nguyễn.

‘*You* said that?’ Nguyễn’s bewildered face turned to Bách.

Luru tapped Nguyễn's shoulder, but spoke to Bách. 'How about the other injured hunters?'

Bách deflected to Danh, whose face paled for being targeted again.

'There were ... *some* others, but that's ... ir...irrelevant.'

'How?' Nguyễn thundered.

'That's because —' Danh whimpered, grabbing Hoá by the elbow. Compelled by Danh's stricken face, Hoá intervened.

'Because ...' Hoá stalled, adapting Bách's argument, 'because the hogs only target *your* family. The others were attacked because they were in the way or ... helping your men.'

'Bách's my cousin, too!' Nguyễn exploded, confounded by the illogic.

'I'm from your *mother's* side,' Bách interjected. 'I'm not related to Old Thông, that's why *I'm* not affected.' He thrust out his chin, trawling the crowd for approval.

Nguyễn lunged at Bách. 'Don't tell me *you* believe this stupid nonsense.'

Luru stepped between them. 'It doesn't matter what you think.' Turning to the team leaders, he announced. 'We can join other teams.'

'No, they can't!' Bách snarled.

'Why not?' Nguyễn pushed towards Bách but Luru held him back.

Old Giang stepped forward, his eyes fixed on Bách. 'We've heard this ... speculation before. Let the leaders select their teams and our Guardians will decide.' Turning to Luru, he concurred. 'You're right. You two can join another team if a leader chooses you.'

'No, they *can't*!' Bách hammered on petulantly.

The Eldest looked warily at him. 'Your turn's finished if you don't want to add any more.'

'I do. Nguyễn can't join any team. He'll bring *danger* to the whole party.'

Luru's grip on Nguyễn tightened. *Wait.*

'How?' The Eldest asked impatiently.

'Since Old Thông killed one of them, the hogs have been targeting his descendants for *revenge*.' Bách grimaced.

'What has this got to do with Nguyễn?' Old Nam's sharp voice cut in.

'The hogs will attack him and others will get hurt if they're in the way or helping.'

'Heard that before,' someone shouted. 'Is that all you've got?'

'Can they *sniff* him out?' The jab from the east brought jeers from the crowd.

Bách turned abruptly to Old Giang.

‘*Your* grandson – he was attacked in the dark! *I* was there. The boar charged directly at him! How do you explain that?’

Old Giang’s shoulders slumped. He suddenly looked old and broken. Stunned into silence by Bách’s attack on the Eldest, everyone’s thoughts turned again to Quân, the only child of his daughter Hà, who had married Nguyễn’s uncle, Thế. Having lost both parents in a landslide, Quân had been raised from a young age by his exterior grandparents, the Eldest and his wife. But Quân and Nguyễn were both Old Thống’s descendants. They shared the same interior grandparents on their fathers’ side.

‘Could it have been a coincidence?’ Someone shouted from the back of the Hall, gaining nods among the crowd.

‘No!’ Bách was adamant. ‘It *was* an aimed attack. Remember what happened to Old Kha, Old Sinh, and, *oh!*’ He faced the Chief Hunter. ‘*You* saw how Old Vĩnh was assaulted. There’s no doubt about *who* was targeted.’

It was as if a snowstorm had blown through Old Nam, coalescing into an icy mass in his chest. He could hear again the screams that had automated his body, gripped by the entanglement mass of black fur and men’s limbs. Thrusting, chopping, pulling, his hands had worked at their own will. His chest heaved in the afternoon heat. His lungs had cried for air, struggling with the hog’s stench and the pungent odours of sweat as he had fought to save his friends.

When the boar lifted its head, its red-rimmed eyes, opaque like liquid coal, had met his. The stare that had thickened his blood and paralysed his limbs had continued to haunt him. Night after night he had woken in terror, seized again by that very moment. But the boar had turned his head and ploughed into Vĩnh, reducing his blood-covered body to gore. He could no longer lull himself by believing in the ‘miracle’ of his rejection as a target. His friend had been fated to become an invalid.

The Hall sank into silence. When Old Giang spoke again, his voice was weighted down with grief and doubt.

‘Who will choose these two lads for his team?’

Nguyễn lifted his head. With a somersaulting heart, Luru watched his friend seek out the three remaining team leaders’ faces, one by one. No one looked at him. Nguyễn’s face fell. Clamping his lips to quell the quivering that had already spread to his chin, Nguyễn stormed out of the Hall.

Luru faced Bách, unchecked contempt in his voice and face.

‘Your despicable scaremongering won’t stop him hunting.’

He strode from the Hall, leaving Bách to the erupting crowd.

Chapter 2: *A Mutiny on the Mountain*

Luru flew down the stairs from the Hall. He looked around for Nguyễn but found no-one. There was no sound apart from faint murmurs coming from above. No traces of his friend. He ran down the main path away from the Hall.

‘Nguyễn ơi!’

No answer. Luru called again, stopping to scan nearby bushes. Nothing. He darted to the clearing on the eastern side, where he could see some sections of streets leading south to their homes. They were all empty. *Where did he go?* Turning to the north, he did not expect to see any movement at that time of the night. His heart leapt.

Far away, on the main artery leading to the mountain, something – *someone* – was moving fast. Luru broke once more into a run.

One ... Two Three. Luru crested the third hill and slowed to a stop by the side of the road. He panted. *Please*, he pleaded silently, *wait for me*. The dark figure ahead appeared larger, but it was also moving closer to the foothills’ dense shadows. Luru started running again, picking up speed on the downward slope, welcoming a cool breeze on his face.

*

Cutting through the orange-coloured chaos and emerging into a white silent space, Nguyễn let his feet carry him. Not seeing further than a stone’s throw ahead, he heard only the wind across his ears, noticing only vague dark shapes of bushes as he sped along.

Bách. A hot current rose from his chest, burned at his throat, rose to his eyes. Countless times he had endured senseless orders, harrassment and taunting from his older cousin, only to be reprimanded by their elders, when he could not take any more bullying and had stood up to Bách. Never had he thought Bách would resort to digging up the stupid rumour about his family. He wanted to scream. To smash something. He swallowed the hot tears rising to his eyes. *No. He’s not worth it*. He took a deep breath. *Thanks to the ancestors, Luru has spoken for me*.

Luru. Nguyễn stopped in his track. Large boulders loomed in front of him. In layers of shadow, the scenery was only barely familiar. *Where’s Luru?* Nguyễn turned around, seeing the Great Hall still lit up in the distance. *Luru was speaking. For me*. Exhaustion swept over him. Guilt and grief had piled on him. He wandered back. *Sorry Luru. I’m so sorry*.

Something was moving fast over the hill. A person wearing light coloured clothes was running, arms swinging, gaining speed.

Luru. Nguyễn breathed out. His heart lightened and his feet grew leaden at the same time.

*

Nguyễn was waiting for Luru on a rock hidden in the shadows by the roadside. Seeing his friend heading purposefully to the hills, he called out.

‘Here.’

Luru ran towards the voice. He had been searching for Nguyễn, who had vanished while he looked down to check his footing on the rocky slope. Luru would have shouted if he could speak, but his frustration turned into a relief when he saw his friend under the tree.

‘I’m sorry,’ Nguyễn said.

‘What are you ... doing?’ Luru panted, speaking at the same time. ‘It’s all right,’ he said.

‘I don’t know,’ Nguyễn said.

Nguyễn moved over and Luru sat down. They sat in silence until Luru caught his breath.

‘Let’s go,’ Luru said, eventually.

‘I don’t want to go home.’ Nguyễn sounded miserable.

‘Được thôi, where would you like to go?’

‘Don’t know. Up the mountain?’

Luru looked up; the moon was high ahead and the sky was cloudless. They could not have wished for better conditions for night trekking.

‘Ừ thì đi, let’s go then.’ Luru stood, pulling his friend up. His smile died when he saw Nguyễn’s dejected face.

The friends walked side by side around crags and boulders in the foothills and up the narrow root-crossed track towards the mountain. Moonbeams shone through the gaps between trees, reminding Luru of the hide-and-seek games they had often played in Nguyễn’s luxuriant garden on moonlit nights.

‘Why did Bách dig *that* up?’ Nguyễn’s voice broke the silence. ‘What’s in it for him?’

‘A lot.’ Luru saw again Bách’s cold eyes glinting with malice after crushing Nguyễn’s hope at the meeting. ‘It’s the only sure way to achieve his aim.’ He was surprised hearing his own bitterness.

‘What aim?’

Nguyễn jolted to a stop. Luru could not look away from his upset face. He knew he could no longer protect Nguyễn’s feelings by keeping him in the dark.

‘I’ve heard that Bách is planning to join the ranks of the village’s leaders. He aims to become the most powerful one, soon, when our current Elders retire.’

Nguyễn stared at him in dismay. Luru was compelled to share further, seeing his troubled face.

‘You’ve attracted a lot of praise and attention recently, that makes you a rival in Bách’s eyes. You match him in most things he’s proud of. You’ve become a threat to his self-proclaimed status as a champion.’

Nguyễn froze. He remembered Bách loudly dismissing the success of his and Luru’s last deer hunt as a fluke, when their group had gathered in Nguyễn’s back garden to celebrate. And another evening, in the Hall, Bách had interrupted with details of his own save-and-rescue when the Elders were praising Nguyễn’s quick action in saving an ox from being buried alive in a mud hole. The ox had slipped off the track in a downpour and the broken cart had fallen on top of it. Nguyễn had not only saved the animal but also a cartful of produce. He had singlehandedly delivered everything to the closest shelter. Bách’s story was unremarkable and already known to everyone, but his loud recounting had redirected everyone’s attention back to himself. Nguyễn had been disheartened by Bách’s behaviour, but dismissed it as yet another example of his conceitedness.

The friends started walking again, Luru in the lead. When they arrived at the first lookout, Luru sat down on a log and motioned for Nguyễn to join him.

‘Luru, I know what you mean, but ... why must I be excluded from a group hunt?’ Nguyễn sounded upset and confused.

‘Because people like working with you. You don’t take credit away from others. And you have an equal, if not better, chance of scoring hits. You’re a threat to Bách’s ambition.’

‘Are you sure Bách’s behind this? Do you think he really believes the nonsense superstition?’

Luru sighed inwardly. Nguyễn’s steadfast kindness and loyalty to his family and friends were his strength, but sometimes they prevented him from seeing ugly traits in people. Luru braced himself for what he must now tell, distressed by the pain it would cause his friend.

‘Bách spoke at the market today. He called on people to vote against you, scared them with the old myth.’ His voice softened. ‘I’m sorry ...’ *Sorry for not telling you earlier. For breaking your heart with Bách’s treachery.*

Nguyễn’s lips were grey in the moonlight. He stared, unseeing, into the distance. Luru had seen that look before. He had lingered in the fading light with Nguyễn at his mother’s grave, two nine-year-old boys among the tombs after everyone had gone from the site. Now he wanted to hug Nguyễn, as he had done then. But something fierce stirred in him.

‘Mặc kệ họ! We’ll do it ourselves.’ Luru declared.

Nguyễn turned slowly to Luru, the fog lifting from his eyes.

‘Just ... us?’

‘Why not?’

‘We’ve never ... anything *that* big ... on our own ...’

‘True, but ... we’ve never tried ...’

Nguyễn’s chin lifted as the weariness dissipated from his face. Sharpness returned to his features, his jaws squared.

‘Let’s do it.’

*

The moon was setting behind the western ranges when they descended the mountain. Thousands, no, millions of stars punctured the blue-black sky; there was barely a gap in the celestial crowd when the friends parted at the turn-off to Nguyễn’s house. They had finalised a breakaway plan. Knowing the hogs’ habits of hunting at dawn and dusk, they had decided to leave early on the evening of the full moon, the Fourteenth Lunar Day, to travel with stealth and speed to the waterholes, where they would set traps and hunt at first light. The villagers’ expedition, also planned for a full moon departure, had been postponed for a month due to the Lễ Vu Lan ceremony on that same day. They would only have four days to prepare for their trip.

Walking briskly up the last hill towards home, Luru was buzzing with excitement. The pre-dawn chill refreshed him and his thoughts turned to a long list of tasks that must be done over the coming days.

Fifteen steps. A landing. Six steps. A right turn. Twenty-four steps. A short path leading right. Eight steep steps. A narrow landing. Three more. Even before reaching the gate, his lungs had filled with the heavenly fragrance of the ngọc lan flower by his front door. His footfalls on the curved stone path across the inner garden woke the still night. Four steps. The double doors were smooth and dark against the lighter walls. Sixty steps from the street to his door, he could have made it home with his eyes closed. Turning left, he entered the house through the kitchen, took a long drink of water and settled quietly in his room. The first hint of grey appeared at the window. He fell asleep to the sound of his mother’s soft footsteps coming down the hallway.

*

It was early morning on the Twelfth Day of the Seventh Lunar Month.

Luru and Nguyễn were back in the empty Hall, standing by the southeastern window. They had been there for a while, going over details of their plan. Looking across the valleys, Luru noticed a soft pink brightened the gaps between distant mountains, adding warmth to the pale light over the fields, turning the granite-coloured river to silver as it wound its way south. A light mist still hung over treetops. It was cool inside the Hall.

‘I guess you’re not asking the Guardians for approval?’ Luru asked evenly.

‘No.’ Nguyễn replied. ‘What for? We’re going regardless, right?’

‘So we’re here for...?’ Luru raised an eyebrow.

‘To please Oldest Sister,’ Nguyễn groaned. ‘She wouldn’t be at peace otherwise.’

Luru laughed. Duty and love had always been tightly intertwined for his kind-hearted friend: actions were his only way of showing affection.

‘Oldest Brother spoke to me last night.’ Nguyễn spoke quietly. ‘He was adamant that I should not go hunting again. He feared for my life and others’. He believed Bách!’ His voice rose with unconcealed irritation.

Luru nodded. Bách knew how to wield fear as an effective weapon and had predicted his claim would work to his desire, seemingly through decisions made by the Elders and others who revered myths and legends.

‘What did you say?’

‘I told him that I, *we*, will go, regardless.’ Nguyễn’s voice dropped again. ‘He got mad. Then Oldest Sister stepped in —’

Luru nodded, motioned for him to go on.

‘She told Oldest Brother that I’m not a child any more, I must be allowed to decide things for myself.’ Nguyễn’s cheeks coloured. ‘She begged me to pray to my parents for protection and to inform the village Guardians.’ He looked away, adding softly. ‘She cried. I couldn’t refuse.’

In the pale grey light, Nguyễn appeared older. There were shadows beneath his cheekbones and in the hollows of his temples. Luru waited, knowing Nguyễn’s affection and respect for his oldest sister-in-law, Sương. An exemplary woman of the old tradition, Sương had gracefully assumed the demanding duties of the oldest daughter-in-law in their large family. She had married the oldest son, Long, when Nguyễn was only five. Soon after Long’s mother took ill, Sương had absorbed the responsibilities of the family matriarch, nursing her bedridden mother-in-law until her last day, and had raised Nguyễn as her own.

Oldest Sister Sương was the closest to a mother Nguyễn had known. Through love and devotion, her gentle persistence had won her the household’s obedience. Luru smiled thinking of the recent concession Nguyễn had given Sương. Despite his own preference for a small event, he had agreed to the most formal engagement to his fiancée, Hiền: the full elaborate sequence of proposal-to-acceptance traditional ceremonies, culminating in a grand banquet.

‘So ... what have you done to *please* her this time?’ Luru teased.

‘I did what she asked,’ came the subdued reply.

‘And we’re here to ... *inform* the Guardians? How about your parents?’

‘Yes. And I did that too. Last night.’

*

Nguyễn stood in front of the family’s great altar. A large oil lamp at the feet of the Buddha statue lit the worship room, illuminating his parents’ portraits among rows of his ancestors’ name plaques and paintings. He had come reluctantly to fulfill his promise to Oldest Sister; but once there, he was glad he did: this act of faith and spiritual supplication had somehow sealed their plan. Lighting the trầm hương, he bowed and prayed silently.

Reverent ancestors, father and mother: please watch over Luru and me on our coming hunt, protect us from harm and guide us safely home.

Planting the incense sticks in the lư hương, Nguyễn doubted his parents would have approved of this impetuous trip, had they still been alive. From behind the smokescreen of burning incense, his father’s eyes seemed to send mixed messages of concern and encouragement, while his mother appeared close to tears. *I’ll be fine, mother*, he had pleaded, wishing for Luru’s strength of persuasion. *I’ve grown a lot since ...*

He had tossed and turned in bed afterwards in an unusually hot and humid night. He had rarely dreamed at all, and if he did, he would remember next to nothing once he was awake. Lying in the dark in the small hours later, he was perturbed by the clarity and intensity of strange dreams that had plagued him that night: he and Luru were chasing some dark animals that continued to change shape and size like shifting smoke. Sometimes the animals appeared disguised as shrubs or blended into the shadows, evading capture, then luring them into a strange forest. After a while, the hunt was reversed. He and Luru were being chased in the darkening woods. They did not know who or what they were running from, only certain of imminent danger and the need to find their way out. An ancient forest was closing in on them.

He woke up covered in sweat. His heart hammered while trying to make sense of the menacing images, then resolved to bar them from his mind. Yet he could not help wondering how they had come about or what they meant, only to have the sense of foreboding strengthened. He jumped out of bed at the first birdcall and raced to Luru’s home, dragging his mystified and still sleepy friend to Đình Làng. He kept the dreams to himself, mentioning only what he had promised to do for his family.

*

Luru also had his own family duty to fulfil. He woke up late after only a few hours’ sleep from dawn, he had spent most of the morning, between seeing patients, wondering how to approach his parents about the breakaway plan. Rushing home from his morning visits, he had asked to

speak with both parents at the first opportunity after gulping down his midday rice. He waited by the sập gỗ in the family room until his parents had settled on the large wooden divan.

‘Thưa Thầy, Mẹ, I have something to tell you.’ He had worked hard to keep his voice steady.

‘What is it, son?’ Both his parents spoke at once.

Luru heard a note of alarm in his mother’s voice and recognised the soothing tone his father often used on distressed patients. He lowered his eyes, knowing nothing could prepare his parents for what he was proposing to do. This was a different kind of courage he needed to make the trip happen.

‘We were not selected at last night’s meeting. Nguyễn and I are going ... on our own,’ he held his breath.

Luru saw his parents’ mouths moving but could not grasp their disjointed words. His mother’s lips trembled. His father’s deep-set eyes sunk further into the dark rings circling them. The lines on his face multiplied; his sharp Adam’s apple lurched up and down in the silence afterward.

Luru had walked away shortly after with his parents’ blessing, carrying with him the imprints of their fear and distress. Their brief exchange was a blur. What his parents did not mention weighed heavy in his heart. As the youngest and only surviving of eight children, he bore the responsibility not only of caring for his parents in their old age, but also of continuing his family’s name and reputation for medical care in the village. Never had the immensity of responsibilities been clearer to him. His father’s declining health and eyesight meant that he would soon step up to the role of chief medical provider. Yet his parents only asked him to take utmost care on the trip, and to pray for protection from the village’s Guardians and his ancestors. Luru promised to keep himself and Nguyễn safe, but he had nothing to offer his parents that would match their generosity.

*

Chatter from a group of approaching farmers stirred the morning stillness and brought the friends back to their present tasks. Following Nguyễn to the altar, Luru’s attention was captured by the view through the Hall’s western windows. The old forest was looming in the distance like a dark green wall, challenging them with its hidden dangers and secrets. Luru’s pulse quickened; in two-days’ time they would be journeying into its heart.

Nguyễn lit the lamps and three incense sticks on the Guardian’s altar. He prayed silently with his head bowed and finished with a decisive efficiency. Stepping back, he surprised Luru, who was still lighting his own incense. Luru’s hands trembled at the vision that returned in the

flame: his parents bending over the torn chest of a man bearing Nguyễn's face. Dropping to his knees, Lưu prayed.

Reverent Guardians, please watch over us and protect Nguyễn from harm on our coming journey. Have pity on us, forgive us for our defiance and guide us safely home, no matter what meets us on our way.

Nguyễn's sombre face was fixed on him when he turned around.

'Let's go!' Nguyễn smiled and the weight lifted from Lưu's chest.

They extinguished the lamps and left the Hall. They should have waited for the incense to burn down, expressing their respect for the spirits they were praying to, but there was no time.

The first sheets of sunlight had lightened the eastern plain when the friends stepped out on the balcony. Farmers in their dark clothes and conical hats had already dotted the fields, harvesting the remainder of the season's rice crop. Speeding home on their light feet in the fresh morning air, Lưu and Nguyễn parted near the bamboo thicket. Their minds were already focussing on what needed to be done over the coming two days.

Chapter 3: A Full Moon Tale

The full moon rose at dusk on the Fourteenth Lunar Day. Gulping down a last drink of water by the kitchen window, Luru marvelled at the enormous egg-yellow dish perching on top of the purple ranges. The moon seemed unbelievably close, almost within reach, its peculiar pattern a sharp imprint on the perfect circle.

Unbidden, the story of the bad boy, Cuội, came to his mind. He remembered the rhyme his mother had taught him, when he had asked her about the shining plate with dirty marks.

Thằng Cuội ngồi gốc cây đa

Để trâu ăn lúa, gọi cha hời hời ...

Young Cuội sat under the bodha tree

His ox fed in the rice paddy, he cried out for his father ...

He had learned that Cuội was banished to the moon for day dreaming, leaving his untended ox feeding on the rice field. Luru felt sorry for poor Cuội, trapped so far from home. He looked for the boy in the moon, but was disappointed that he only saw a hare. His mother had sat with him, listening to his description then studying the moon, her arms wrapped around him,

‘It’s true!’ She had laughed and hugged him. ‘It does look like a hare. I wouldn’t have seen it if you hadn’t shown me.’

His three-year-old chest had puffed up with pride. That night remained a bright memory, a full moon some hundreds of moons away, a secret between his mother and himself.

Luru shared the secret with Nguyễn when they were twelve. They had just finished his mother’s full moon offering to the ancestors: chè, xôi, sweet and savoury treats. Sprawling in Luru’s garden enjoying a clear, bright-as-day autumn night. Nguyễn stared at him, mumbling something about ‘being too long with powdered roots and tinctures.’ It was true that Luru had spent a large part of the day helping his father prepare the medications.

‘I’ve seen the hare since I was three!’ Luru insisted.

Nguyễn had looked at the moon again and shaken his head. ‘You’ve got a penchant for seeing things ... *not* there...’

He had laughed at Nguyễn’s troubled face.

Now he searched again for the boy Cuội under the bodha tree. *No, I can’t see him at all. More like a sitting hare to me. Still.*

*

‘Have you made the new batch of mosquito ointment?’ His mother asked from across the kitchen. Even now, she was looking after him.

‘Yes, mother.’ Luru looked fondly at his parents, who were still finishing their night rice.

‘They’re going to the jungle ...’ his father chuckled. *To hunt large animals, and you’re worrying about mosquitoes.* Luru knew what his father had left unsaid.

‘I know, but that’s where he’ll really need it. Who knows what fevers mosquitoes brought there.’

‘That’s true, mother,’ Luru conceded. ‘I’ve packed some for Nguyễn, too.’

Luru’s mother came to him. Small and silver-haired, she still had the bright eyes that told more than words can deliver. There was a soft kind of sadness in them now. Not the kind that showed when he had fevers or stomachaches, more like when he had scraped his limbs or developed bruises.

‘Don’t be late for tomorrow’s night rice.’ She patted his arm. ‘Your favourite dishes will be ready early.’

‘We’ll be back in the afternoon.’ Luru lifted his bag, full of food and medicines his mother had packed for him. ‘Earlier, if we don’t catch anything. We should go ... more often, don’t you think? Having treats to take away and more waiting at home?’ He grinned.

‘I wish you’d delay for just one more day. Tomorrow is Lễ Vu Lan. You’ll miss the morning ceremony and celebrations ...’

‘You can give me your blessings at night.’ Luru sounded more cheerful than he felt. The Buddhist Lễ Vu Lan filial piety ceremony was for children to commemorate deceased parents, or to honour and give thanks to living parents. Both of his parents had missed decades of their parents’ blessings since they had married and moved away from their extended families; but this year would be the first time they attended the ceremony without any children.

Sighing quietly, his mother took a small parcel from her tunic pocket and handed it to him. Wrapped in a cream silk handkerchief was her gold-trimmed jade statue of Quan Âm Bồ Tát.

‘No, mother, I can’t possibly ...’

‘Please, son, keep it close ... for your safety.’ She closed his fingers around the sacred pendant. ‘For me.’

The jade statue was his mother’s most precious wedding gift, from her mother. She had worn it on a gold chain around her neck in her younger years, a talisman of love and protection carrying the grace of the Bodhisattva of Compassion. It had been passed on to each of her newborn children, kept close to their bodies in the inner pockets of their clothing. One by one,

the infants and toddlers had died from irremediable fevers. He was the last and only one left of her eight children.

Luru remembered there was always a tiny square pouch secured in his top's pocket; his mother had shifted the pendant every time to his new change of clothes. Around the time he started school, he had asked her about it. Seeing the jade statue for the first time and hearing its history, he was adamant that he would not carry it any more: it was too precious. He was hardly ever sick and was not going to die from babies' illnesses, he had reasoned. His mother had relented, but he had spotted the pouch under his pillow or stitched into his clothing when he was sick. Once he had to wear it on a chain around his neck for several days until a fever had subsided. He could not refuse her this, not now. Squeezing his mother's soft, small hands, his heart contracted at noticing the wrinkled skin wrapped loosely around her thin wrists and fingers.

'Let him go while there's still light,' his father said, approaching them. 'I'm beginning to wonder what I missed, not joining any hunt in my youth.' He patted the back of Luru's head. 'Keep to the track, son, and don't stay long near stagnant water.'

Luru was buoyed by his father's rare playfulness. 'We won't be near the waterholes for long.' He reassured them both.

Luru straightened his pack, collected his weapons by the side door and looked back at his parents standing together in the darkening room.

'Con chào Thầy, Mẹ.' He said his last goodbye.

*

Emerging from the house, Luru strode along the high verandah. The summer scented warmth had settled languidly into every nook and cranny of the garden, gathering in concentrated pockets around fruit trees and blooming flowers. Sixty, fifty nine, fifty eight, fifty seven. He counted silently, inhaling with every breath the exquisite fragrance of the ngọc lan flower at the bottom step. He had not counted backwards on leaving home for a long time, perhaps because he was always rushing to get someplace.

He remembered the first time he had done this, when he was six. He had just recovered from being sick for several days and was leaving home with his parents for a ceremony. Resting between fevers, he had imagined trips to and from home, labelling every stair with a number while tracing his steps upward from the street. Observing with fresh eyes on that day, he had noticed that objects he saw on his way down stood on the opposite side of the path from his way up. Another fascinating and equally challenging thing he had also discovered was that everything appeared different depending on whether he was coming to the house or going from it: the

mandarin bush looked round on approaching, but flat on leaving it; the gate opened forward on the way in, but backward on the way out.

He had been counting backward and observing quietly when they had reached the street. *Zero*. He had stopped counting and wondered whether he would see things in the street in a new way. His mother had called to him. He had looked up and seen questions on her face.

‘I saw going down was ... different from going up...’

He had struggled to explain to his mother what he had observed. She listened and considered what he had said.

‘That’s right, son! Things always look different from the other side.’ She understood!

He had beamed with relief.

Now, as he closed the gate behind him, Luru realised that his confidence had grown from that moment. He had learned that it was all right to see things differently; that some of those observable differences were hidden truths. That night, his father had begun teaching him mathematical patterns, going on to show him different constellations in the night sky. Soon he was taught observable symptoms of medical conditions and some basic treatments. His mother had continued to sing him songs, teaching him history and poetry, recounting fables and answering all his questions. Almost.

*

Arriving at Nguyễn’s home, he left his weapons at the bottom of the stairs and hopped up to the verandah, two and three steps at a time. He called out for Nguyễn and waited.

The last rays of sunlight glazed the polished front doors a brilliant red. For the first time, Luru’s full attention was focused on the breathtaking artistry of the door panels. Framed by intricate carvings of native plants that were true to life, the main panels depicted cranes dancing over a lotus field. *Celebrate longevity in purity*. Luru understood the wish Nguyễn’s forebearers had bestowed on their family. A single crane flew towards distant ranges on the upper right panel. *What could it mean?*

The panel swung inward. Nguyễn stood in the frame.

‘Hey, you’re early,’ Nguyễn’s face lit up. ‘Come in.’

A dark band around Nguyễn’s neck caught Luru’s eyes. Not one for adornments, he was wearing a leather thong. Resting in between the sternum and the hollow of his throat was ...

‘It ... can’t be —’ Luru eyes widened.

Nguyễn’s hand went to the amulet on his chest. He held it out to Luru.

‘It is.’

Luru's hand closed around the hog tusk, marvelled at how long it was, its sharp tip protruding beyond the width of his hand. Rolling it in his palm, he felt the coolness of its surface, felt the strange ridge on its underside, and observed the tiny cracks like dark veins emanating from its root. Pressing his thumb over the tip of the tusk, he stared in disbelief as a red dot appeared. *Some things in the Legend are true.* His eyes met Nguyễn's.

‘When... *how* did you get it?’

‘I went to say goodbye to Hiền last night. She begged me to ask my family to borrow it for the trip.’ Nguyễn spoke excitedly, reclaiming the amulet. ‘When I got home, Oldest Brother handed it to me. Apparently, Oldest Sister had the same thought and had asked my brother for it. She had prayed to the ancestors for permission to remove it from the altar, while I was at Hiền's. She insisted that I must wear it for protection.’

Luru's pulse quickened. He was overwhelmed by a strange sense of security, destiny and mystery all at once, and wondered what had evoked in him this unusual mixture of feelings. He had glimpsed the revered amulet over the years, but had never thought it would be removed from the family altar beside Old Thống's portrait. For the first time, he realised how much Nguyễn's family feared for his life. His parents, too.

‘My mother gave me her Quan Âm Bồ Tát statue,’ Luru said in a subdued voice.

Nguyễn's eyes met his in solemn acknowledgement.

*

Emerging from the grey hallway, the friends stepped into the warm glow surrounding Nguyễn's family at the dining table. Long, Sương and their five children were still finishing their night rice.

‘Of course I will join Youngest Uncle when I turn fifteen, next year, or as soon as mother lets me,’ Đạt declared to his bright-eyed siblings.

Nguyễn nodded approvingly at his nephew, knowing Long and Sương's oldest son would not let his parents' fear deter him from hunting.

‘Take a seat, Luru.’ Sương was already shifting her children's chairs to make room for him. ‘Eat something with us.’

‘Chào anh chị.’ Luru deferred to the host couple. ‘Thank you sister, I've just had my night rice.’

‘Nguyễn is yet to finish. Would you like some tea and mứt gừng or ô mai while you wait?’

‘Yes, thank you. I'll help myself.’ Luru nodded, put down his pack and accepted a plate of ginger slices and preserved fruits.

Luru talked to the host couple, enjoying freshly brewed tea and treats, while waiting for Nguyễn to get ready. Swarmed by their children, who called him ‘uncle’, Luru was happy for his friend. Despite losing both parents at a young age, Nguyễn had grown up in a lively household among his siblings and their spouses, so different from Luru’s. Watching the children, holding the youngest on his lap, he could imagine Nguyễn with his own family in the future, something he had never imagined for himself. Luru set the toddler down, when Nguyễn returned from his room with his enormous pack.

‘Are you sure that’s enough for *one* day?’ Luru teased.

‘It’s a long trip,’ Nguyễn winked and looked toward Suong. ‘Oldest Sister made sure she’s packed enough food and drinks and ... *essential* things in case we get lost in the woods.’

‘I thought *I* had enough for us both,’ Luru chuckled. ‘Mother packed enough medicine for a troop.’

‘Let’s get going then, Herbal Boy.’ Nguyễn slapped Luru’s back. ‘You can bandage the hogs after I’ve had a go at them.’

‘Ha!’ Luru pinned Nguyễn against the wall. ‘Sharpen your handsaw. You’ll be *my* assistant when I show them mercy.’

The handsaw was a private joke. It was Nguyễn’s most needed tool and he spent a large amount of time sharpening it. Sometimes he used this chore to avoid attending functions, preferring to spend time with his tools rather than with boring people. Luru thought it was the lamest excuse and enjoyed poking fun at his friend whenever the opportunity arose. Their eyes locked. For an instant, each saw in the other the same little boy he had grown up with. Nguyễn broke free of Luru’s grip, elbowed him in the ribs.

‘Sorry,’ Nguyễn laughed. ‘No handsaw today. Spear and sword only. We’re hunting, remember?’

Luru caught the look on Suong’s face as the friends said their goodbyes. Dutifully, he gave her the same reassurance he had given his mother at his departure.

‘You know I’m responsible enough for us both.’ He assumed a theatrical solemn face. ‘You can count on me to bring back your little boy home safe and sound.’

‘Humph!’ Nguyễn grunted, and a smile broke on Suong’s face.

‘Let’s go, Termite Boy.’ Luru propelled Nguyễn towards the doors. ‘Let’s walk off some food, shall we?’

*

Nguyễn and Luru crossed the hanging bridge at the western border of the village and headed towards the old forest that spread from the mid-west to the foot of the mountain in the north.

According to the elders, the forest covered an area larger than several dozen villages put together. There were unexplored parts and it was rumoured that its borders sometimes shifted or merged into unknown lands, but Tĩnh Vân's people and surrounding villagers rarely ventured to the far edges of the woods. There was plenty to be hunted and gathered in a walk of just a few hours from the edge of the forest in the lowland.

By the time the friends reached the forest, the moon had cleared the treetops. Its golden tone turned to silver with a brightness close to daylight. Yet only a few steps beyond the threshold, darkness quickly enfolded the forest. As they went deeper into the woods, quietness seemed to thicken and spread around them. Apart from their footfalls, and the occasional hooting of owls, the only sounds revealing the presence of other creatures was some rustling in the trees and snapping of twigs among the bushes.

The friends had been managing without a torch, following the received wisdom of hunters. But once the path turned directly west, the light from needle-thin moonbeams diminished quickly. Luru heard a thump.

'Torch?' he called out, hurrying forward.

Unable to make out Nguyễn in his dark clothes, Luru heard only creaking sounds from his pack being set down. Some rustlings. A sharp crack of firestones scraped together. A tiny spark, followed by the smell of hot stone. Another crack. A flame. The torch flared in Nguyễn's hand.

'There's no way we can get through the woods without the torch.' Luru said, relieved to see everything properly again.

'I thought you'd call for it sooner.' Nguyễn lifted his pack, continuing to lead the way.

'I'm sorry. You can see so well in the dark, I thought we could ... without ...'

'I remember you once thought there was something wrong with my eyes,' Nguyễn teased.

Luru hadn't forgotten that. *Neither of us ever will*, he thought. *It was near here*. Luru looked around. Soon, they rounded a bend and Luru pointed to the left. 'Look!'

Nguyễn's eyes widened. He shuddered, seeing a mass of monstrous vines twisted between giant trees, stretching far into the shadows.

Luru's heart lurched, remembering that long-ago day, when they were eleven.

*

It had been a cloudless summer day, late in the afternoon, when they had taken a break at that very same place, after wandering for hours in the woods. Luru had lost sight of Nguyễn, but assumed his friend was exploring or collecting berries nearby. When his repeated calls had gone unanswered, he had searched frantically for Nguyễn but found no trace of him. Panicking, he

went back to their starting place and methodically combed every track for signs of his friend. Remnants of clean-picked fresh berry stalks had eventually led him to Nguyễn, who was resting in the shade among a thicket of giant vines several metres off the ground.

As he ran toward the thicket, Luru's calls to Nguyễn had died in his throat. His voice had returned as screams when he saw his friend was writhing in the clutch of oddly moving vines. Realising that some of the 'vines' were camouflaged pythons, he had bolted to the saman tree's sprawling roots and scrambled up its thick trunk, armed only with his pocketknife. He had gasped for air in the clammy heat, overwhelmed by the sickly smell of rot rising from the thick carpet of leaves and twigs below. His eyes had stung and watered, his limbs bled from gashes. Once he had caught hold of a sturdy vine, he had dangled and swung his way towards Nguyễn. Sobbing, he had begged his friend to hang on.

An arm-length away from Nguyễn, his hands slid over a slimy surface that caused Luru to shake with revulsion. Once he had steadied himself, he had stabbed madly at the vegetation, unable to tell whether he was slashing snakes or vine trunks. He had watched, horrified, as the snakes bulged and coiled themselves among the riotous mass, eventually slithering away, melting into nearby thickets. Nguyễn had fought hard to cling on to the vines, but his weakened limbs had given out. He had fallen and landed on his side, where he had lain motionless.

What had happened afterwards, and how they had made it home, after dark, remained a debatable memory that neither of them could quite recall. But like most memorable events they had shared, the incident had been kept a secret between them. They called it the 'hammock incident' because from a distance, the vines had looked so like a hammock to Nguyễn that he had decided to take a nap on them. Thereafter, Luru had teased him relentlessly about his eyesight.

*

Encouraged by the torchlight, the friends began quietly chatting again, remembering their own and others' misadventures, invoked in trepidation and eeriness as they moved deeper into the old forest. Reprieved from the darkness that seemed less sinister with a circle of light around them, the friends' voices rose a little at times, waking the porcupines, hares and squirrels, sending the startled animals scurrying away under the bushes or fleeing up branches.

After some time, they stopped for a quick drink of water. Nguyễn saw something in the shadows. He pulled Luru over and pointed to a small but conspicuous mound of leaves and twigs.

'Look! Wanna *jump* on that?'

Luru grimaced.

'No?' Nguyễn's eyes were laughing but his tone was kind. 'Let's go then.'

Luru silently followed Nguyễn but his eyes stayed on the mound until it blurred into the shadows behind them. He picked up his pace, unconsciously keeping himself within his friend's reach. His mind raced, hurling him back to another day, when yet another mound had turned out to be something other than what it appeared to be.

*

It had been a bright, cool, autumn day. Five boys were gathering end-of-season picks in the forest and started a game of hide-and-seek. Luru had run off in a different direction from the others. Spotting a heap of leaves and twigs, he had thrown himself on it, expecting a good bounce and a spectacular scattering of leaves. He had no memory of his landing, but the bodily sensations of the aftermath were indelible.

Pain had woken him. His head and upper body throbbed with a crushing pain. Disoriented, he had felt something on his face. Dry soil. He had smelled something pungent. Crushed leaves. He tried to move but rebounded in agony. Fear locked his muscles and set his heart hammering. Slowly, his sight adjusted to the dim light coming through the gaps in branches above him and saw what appeared to be a curved earth wall.

Where am I?

His ribs hurt with every breath. His left arm burned where it bent at a wrong angle, wedged under his body. Biting hard on his tongue to stay conscious, he managed to lift his torso and gradually sit up. He called out to the others, weakly at first, then louder and louder until his lungs had almost burst. With his right hand he dug into the earth wall to hold himself up, to crane his neck higher. No answer. The hole on the wall had gotten larger. Loose dirt covered his feet. The opening above was far from his reach. His hand had slipped and he crumpled at the bottom of the pit.

The autumn afternoon had drawn quickly to a close. It was cold and almost dark when he heard approaching noises. He called out, but only indistinct whispers came: his voice had gone. When he was lifted out of the pit and carried home, Nguyễn cried as if he was himself in pain. His best friend was the only child in the rescue team of men and dogs.

Luru learned later that when other boys had scattered, running home only to tell Luru's parents that he was lost, Nguyễn had chosen to stay behind. He had searched alone, calling until he was hoarse and chilled, but he continued with the search party when they arrived. Although Luru had joked during his recovery, telling Nguyễn that he was 'just having a nap in a perfect hiding spot', from that day on, both boys knew, each in his own heart, that they were more like brothers than friends. Despite Luru's teasing, calling him a 'mush' and 'he who melted into a

puddle', Nguyễn brought him presents: his own handmade wooden figurines or trades from the markets to cheer Luru up until he had fully recovered.

*

Now, Nguyễn slowed down, leaned his pack against a tree trunk and motioned to Luru. They stopped for another drink as their third torch was burning out. Gazing contemplatively at the dying flame, Nguyễn took a fresh torch out of his bag.

'We must've travelled for hours,' he muttered. 'We should've been there by now...'

'Hmm ...' Luru frowned. 'Can't see much here, but we must be close.'

'Do you want to rest?' Nguyễn checked his friend's weary face.

'No, let's get to the waterhole.' Luru yawned but was already on his feet. He took the torch from Nguyễn's hand. 'Get there first, set up traps then we'll have a nap until dawn.'

They trod along in silence for some distance. Finally, rounding a bend, Luru's steps quickened then stopped.

'Look!' Luru pointed to the left.

Nguyễn rushed forward. 'We're there!' He called out, seeing moonlight shining beyond a thinning curtain of trees, illuminating a patch of ground.

'Keep quiet. Get ready,' Luru hushed.

He put out the torch and uncovered his sword. Nguyễn held the spear in his right hand. They crossed the last few spans to the edge of the forest, keeping close to the shadows of a few ragged bushes. Nguyễn noticed the tiredness had gone from Luru's face. His eyes shone with excitement and his steps were light and quick.

Pausing behind the last clump of trees, the friends surveyed the area for suitable places to set up traps. But to their dismay, there was no waterhole, only a wide clearing, where scattered twigs and leaves, some already decaying, appeared undisturbed. Looking up, Luru saw patches of white clouds hung against a pale blue background. *White* clouds? *Blue*... sky?

'It ... can't be —' Luru's baffled face met Nguyễn.

'It couldn't be morning already!' Nguyễn was equally flummoxed.

But it was true. Against the unmistakably lightened sky, orange streaked clouds heralded the beginning of a new, brilliant summer day.

Chapter 4: Wordless Wonders

Nguyễn ran into the clearing.

‘This is ... not where ...’ His eyes skimmed the tree clusters for the telltale opening to the water hole.

‘No. I mean ... yes, you’re right.’ Lru strode after Nguyễn to the middle of the clearing, where he stopped. ‘We were ... on the right track.’ He turned to look at the path they had just left, now hidden behind bushes. ‘There’s a turnoff to the wetland.’

‘It can’t be this far.’ Nguyễn’s voice sank.

‘The Y-branching.’ Lru frowned, jogging his memory. ‘The turnoff leads south from the right branch.’

‘No branch.’ Nguyễn said resolutely. ‘We’ve either missed the turnoff or taken a different path.’

‘We should have seen it early in the night.’

‘We were talking.’ Nguyễn sighed. ‘I should’ve paid more attention.’ He put down his weapons and took off his pack. ‘What do we do now?’

Lru set his belongings down beside Nguyễn’s. ‘Let’s have a break.’ He dropped down on a nearby patch of grass. ‘Have something to eat, then go back.’ Picking up the bothered look on Nguyễn’s face, he reassured him. ‘Easy. We’ll go faster and won’t miss the turn-off in daylight.’

Nguyễn sighed and unlaced his pack, put aside unused torches, firestones and other assorted travel items and spread out an oiled sheet. Grabbing rolls and square packages wrapped in cloths, he laid out the food his sister-in-law had packed for them. His stomach rumbled in anticipation. Lru took several gulps from his water gourd and began unpacking his share, but stopped suddenly.

‘Listen!’

‘What is it?’ Nguyễn’s voice crackled with impatience.

‘Shh ...’ Lru rose and took a few steps forward. ‘*Water*. I can hear running water.’ He cocked his head, frowning in concentration.

‘I can’t hear anything!’

‘There!’ Lru’s eyes lit up. ‘Listen!’ He strained leftward.

Nguyễn sat still, focussing. A bird chirping somewhere. A soft whooshing of leaves from up high. Then the murmurs died away. He glanced at Lru.

‘Noth...’ Then he heard it: the soft lapping of water against rock. Nguyễn sprang up.

‘The waterhole!’

The friends scrambled their belongings back into their bags and headed westward, led by the tenuous sound. On the other side of the clearing, they found a narrow track under arches of intertwining canopies. The winding path took them deep into lush greenery layered with unfamiliar plants.

‘I don’t remember this place,’ Nguyễn muttered, ducking under a low-hanging branch.

‘It was almost bare, and muddy,’ Luru recalled. ‘We must’ve taken a different track.’

Nguyễn disappeared around a bend. The continuous sound of running water was unmistakable now. Luru remembered the large waterhole connected to two smaller ones, their muddy banks riddled with deep and shallow hoof-prints. There had been a scattering of old trees in a wide opening.

‘Come look!’ Nguyễn, excited, called from ahead.

Luru rushed forward but did not see his friend on the narrow track. It ended abruptly. He almost ran into Nguyễn standing by a large rock on a pebbled bank.

‘A ... *waterfall*?’ Luru caught his breath.

Didn’t expect this, did you? Nguyễn’s laughing eyes seemed to say. Luru took in the surroundings: a small waterfall backed into a rock wall. The protruding lip fanned the water into a continuous glossy blue-silver sheet that collapsed in a clear pond lined with yellow sand and pebbles. A narrow opening on the opposite side led the water away in a gentle cascade among the rocks.

‘I’ve never heard of a waterfall in these woods,’ Luru said, walking to the water’s edge. He surveyed the clear stream meandering into a lush green region downstream, where it disappeared.

‘Me neither.’ Joining Luru, Nguyễn bent, scooped up water in his hands and splashed his face. ‘Ah ...’ He rubbed his arms, washed his face and neck energetically. ‘Cold ... like a mountain stream.’ He grinned broadly, his teeth gleamed against his tanned face.

Luru stooped and put his hands into the current. Its coldness woke him as he patted water onto his face, neck and arms, feeling the blood rushing to the surface of his skin. He remembered his first-time shock of dipping into freezing mountain water. He had stood frozen in the stream, his hands and legs numbed below the waterline. The sensation had been breathtaking. Nguyễn had laughed at his stupefied face and told him his lips were blue when he pulled Luru out of the water.

Now, walking up the bank, Luru felt his tiredness ebbing away and, in its place, an acute hunger. Nguyễn was already unpacking food.

Luru's stomach rumbled loudly. Nguyễn laughed and made room for him on the flat stone surface where he had spread their provisions. Luru grabbed the closest package: a travel-sized bánh chưng. He unpicked the lạt twine fastened over the wrapping of deep green dong leaves, impatient as he peeled strip by strip of the boiled leaf off the sticky rice cake. He could not wait for a bite that cut through the glutinous green flesh into its rich centre of marinated pork smothered in a velvety mung bean mash. Its smell sent his stomach roiling in anticipation of every savoury morsel of the incomparable treat, whose distinct flavours had been seamlessly fused together following overnight cooking. He thought of this ancient creation by the eighteenth son of the sixth Hùng King, a handmade gift born of love for his parents and in recognition of the hidden wonders in the land. It was an unexpected gift among the hunted treasures – on land and under water – his older brothers had gathered to demonstrate their devotion, as the legend had been passed down for countless generations.

Wonders indeed. Luru lowered his head and lift the peeled cake onto his mouth, concurred with the wise king who had given the top prize of procured treasures to his youngest son's creation, and along with it, his throne. *Such a fitting recognition for the everyday staples our people live on. This cake mightn't have survived till this day if he hadn't won* – his thought was interrupted by the sound of women's voices approaching. Caught in surprise, his hand stopped in mid-air. He looked up, wondering what could have brought the women to such a remote place, knowing it would have taken several hours from any surrounding village to reach that part of the woods. He strained to hear what they were saying but could not make out the words. Someone giggled. *They are contented.* He breathed out, relieved.

The friends looked up as a group of young women appeared from around a bend. Noticing unknown men by the pond, they slowed down. Stopping some distance away, they conferred quietly among themselves, casting glances at the strangers. Seeing them at a closer distance now, the friends realised they were mostly older teen girls. A tall and willowy girl, one of the oldest, left the group. Dressed in áo bà tà like her companions, the girl approached them gracefully. Her glossy ebony hair was secured neatly by a black khăn vành headpiece, leaving only a silken spray above one ear that swayed gently with her steps. The girl paused in front of the friends and bowed lightly.

'I am Liễu,' she said. 'We have not met. Mayhap you have come from afar?' Her voice was gentle and clear with the music of chimes and bells.

Luru took a last hungry and regretful look at his unbitten bánh chưng as he quickly rewrapped it and wiped his hands. The friends stood up, momentarily disarmed by the girls' unexpected appearance. Liễu's unfamiliar accent, distinct from northern highlanders, suggested

that the girls might have come from a different region. Luru bowed lightly from his place and introduced himself and Nguyễn.

‘We’re hunting wild hogs,’ he said. ‘We were looking for a waterhole where they often gather —’ He hesitated, noticing alarmed looks on the girls’ faces.

‘We do not know of your hunting place,’ Liễu said, ‘but you’re welcome to join us in the Flower Valley.’ She waved her arm up the path from where the group had arrived. ‘It’s only a short walk from here.’

The friends looked at one another. *What should we do?* Nguyễn’s expectant eyes waited for a response from Luru, whose stomach rumbled again to his consternation. Luru debated accepting the invitation, knowing his friend was not overly keen on sightseeing.

‘Thank you, miss Liễu,’ Luru said, ‘but we’re only taking a break here. We’ll continue looking for the waterhole, it should be close by.’

Liễu smiled and waved for her companions to come over. They introduced themselves as Phượng, Hoà, Trúc and Tâm. Settling themselves down beside the visitors, the girls opened their hand baskets and offered Luru and Nguyễn fresh fruits they had just picked that morning. On woven mats produced from their baskets, the girls laid out flawless peaches, plums, berries, papayas and other unfamiliar fruits that the friends tasted as they learned their names and the type of tree or vine each fruit had come from. The young men were astounded by extraordinary tastes of not only the unknown produce but also those they had known from their homeland. Somehow the fruits in this region were more flavourful, their scents were more intense, their colours were vibrant and deep.

Luru examined a glossy cone-shaped mauve fruit. Its wide base just covered his palm and he tried to guess what it would taste like.

‘Crisp shell with a tart flavour?’ he ventured.

Wrong again. Nguyễn laughed with the girls when the fruit was cut open, revealing a marbled green creamy texture. The flesh carried a hint of coconut and vanilla flavours that melted into pure sweetness, leaving Luru wordless with bliss. He and Nguyễn each had a few guesses predicting the flavours and texture of the unknown fruits, unsuccessful every time since there was nothing to compare them to. *It was like trying to find commonality between a jackfruit and a mangosteen*, Luru mused, realising each fruit was a distinct creation, an unrelatable self-contained world that carried its own secret language. They simply didn’t have the words to describe them.

The sun had risen well above the horizon by the time they were ready to leave. The friends were already full from the round of offers that they repacked their own food into their bags. Luru and Nguyễn gathered their belongings and thanked the girls for the generous treats.

‘Come with us to the Flower Valley since you’re already here,’ Phụng invited them. She was a little older than Liễu; her voice was slightly deeper but just as melodic. ‘It’s really beautiful there,’ she added, her face lit up.

Her companions nodded and chimed in in unison.

Luru looked at Nguyễn. ‘What do you think?’ He knew Nguyễn was eager to resume the hunt and let him decide.

‘If it’s not far from here ...’ Nguyễn glanced at the girls then back at Luru. ‘We could make a quick visit. It’s still early, we’ll have enough time, don’t you think?’

Luru agreed.

‘Let’s go then,’ said Nguyễn, turning to Phụng. ‘We’ll join you for a quick tour of the Valley. Please lead the way.’

The girls cheered. Leaving the waterfall, the friends followed their hosts circling the pond and headed towards the other side of the forest.

*

They walked in twos and threes, chatting amicably as the party made their way under continuous arches of lush green canopy. Moving deeper into the unknown forest, Luru and Nguyễn recognised less and less of the vegetation. From the profuse undergrowth to the fruit and flowering trees; from the tall, smooth-trunked trees to the luxuriously branched giants, the friends were captivated by new species; some vaguely resembled forest vegetation they knew, but most were unfamiliar to their eyes.

The track narrowed and wound its way down a gentle slope, where Luru noticed the soil was moist and softer. The group eventually emerged into an open space with an uninterrupted view of a cloudless sky and the surrounding lands. Spreading as far as the eyes could see were interconnected valleys filled with patches of every imaginable colour. The Flower Valley. Luru breathed in the fresh morning air filled with exquisite scents. In brand-new memory segments, his mind stored the magnificent scenery of the aptly named valley.

Trúc, a girl around fifteen, moved to the front of the group and waved to someone at a distance. Three young women were emerging from a river at the bottom of the valley, leaving their companions to linger in the water. The three headed up the bank, one rushed forward and Trúc greeted her as Thảo. Luru listened to their singsong exchange: the sounds were familiar, yet the words were unrecognisable. Thảo smiled at the friends as she walked up the slope. Half-

smiling back, Luru observed her in amazement, checking from her head to her feet in sandals, then her companions also. *How was that possible?* Thảo's clothing fell softly around her, just as her two companions', and the girls' long, silken hair swayed lightly around them as they moved. They had just left the river but there was no trace of wetness on them.

Trúc introduced Luru and Nguyễn to Thảo, Tuyết and Ngân, and the group followed the newcomers into the valley. Approaching the water, their attention was caught by two giant silver-green leaves docked at a sandy bank nearby.

'Please board the boats,' Thảo invited.

Boats? Luru stared at the giant leaves bobbing gently on the water. His eyes followed the striking moss-green veins woven naturally through the bodies of the vessels. Nguyễn was admiring their fluid curves, perfectly formed tips and stems. As they looked, the near side of each leaf folded down into a gentle ramp over the water. Luru looked at Thảo, who nodded encouragingly. Nguyễn quietly appraised the leaf's size and sturdiness. He glanced sideways at Luru then boarded the leaf and sat down. Luru watched, fascinated, as the boat dipped momentarily under the combined weight of Nguyễn and his belongings. Six girls filed into the other boat. Shaking himself mentally from his disbelief, Luru joined Nguyễn and the remaining two girls followed him. With the side ramps lifted back in place, the boats headed downstream, apparently self-propelled.

Nguyễn nudged Luru, keeping his voice low. 'Who's steering?'

Luru shook his head. A pure, incredulous joy was welling up in him: something he had not experienced since their younger years' serendipitous discoveries. Oblivious to their guests' bafflement, the girls chatted among themselves, calling out to one another across the vessels as the two boats continued gliding smoothly on the clear, calm water above the white river floor.

'Do you live near the water?' Thảo asked.

'Yes, we do.' Nguyễn answered warmly.

'You looked ... unsure about getting on the boats.'

'We go on boats ... sometimes,' Nguyễn said. 'Wooden boats, with oars, not ...' He looked at Luru. *Not floating leaves.* Luru nodded.

'We've got different kinds too,' Thảo concurred. 'These are the most common, but boats can be made from ... anything that will carry weight.'

Listening to the music in her voice, Luru was not really hearing her words.

'Our land- and water-kin will carry us also, if we ask,' Tuyết added casually.

'Some of your relatives live ... *in* the water?' Nguyễn was intrigued.

‘Yes, many.’ Tuyết seemed surprised at the question. ‘They don’t *look* like ... us, but they can speak and understand us.’

Nguyễn leaned forward. ‘You mean they’re ... *animals*?’

Tuyết nodded slowly, understanding dawned on her. ‘We’ve heard that in faraway places, some kins distanced themselves from people. They kept to themselves for so long that they can’t talk anymore.’

Nguyễn’s puzzlement deepened before a new kind of comprehension began to grow, realising how each group, to the other, was ‘from faraway’. The friends looked at each other. *We’re immigrants in an unknown land.* They were thankful that the girls spoke their language and welcomed them into their homeland. Without sharing, each in his own way had already noticed their lack of knowledge of a very different way of living. Luru reminded himself to pay attention and learn as much as he could from the hostesses; Nguyễn was hoping not to alienate, or worse, inadvertently offend the ethereal young women with his farm-boy clumsiness.

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The leaf-boat’s veins were firm but pleasantly cushioned Luru’s back and neck, moulding themselves to the contours of his body. Nguyễn, too, was resting in bliss against the leaf’s embracing curve. They drifted past orchards and flower fields, sailing deeper into lush green regions of uncultivated land. Dotted along the banks of the river were huts on high stilts, covered in vines and flowers. Sounds of singing wafted down from the picturesque huts and, through open panels, the friends caught glimpses of women spinning. The boats slowed on a bend and Luru watched spellbound at the sight of women pulling glittering strands of sunbeams through the holes in their roofs, spinning them into reels of golden thread. The women’s singing rose and fell harmoniously to the rhythm of their hands on the spinning wheels. Luru abandoned himself to the otherworldly music, drinking in melodies in the same way that he had sampled the unfamiliar fruits offered to them earlier. After a while he could identify bamboo flutes and string instruments delicately accompanying the singing.

The sun was high on a cloudless sky; its rays bounced off disturbances in the water as the vessels sailed along the gently winding river. Schools of splendidly coloured fishes converged around the boats, weaving and speeding playfully in little clusters among themselves in the deep clear water. Luru’s attention was caught by a school of slender fishes with fluorescent green stripes that darted to the water’s edge, where they grew feet and walked along the bank. While most of them were still roaming the sandy slope, some returned to the water and glided toward the boats. The transfixed friends strained forward to check out their feet, but there was no trace of them. A short time later, another school surrounded the boats in a riot of colour. Nguyễn

joined Luru to watch the energetic fish racing to the riverbed, where they stirred up little sand-clouds then, shooting to the surface, they somersaulted in and out of the water in splashes of bright colours. The friends applauded and the girls giggled.

‘We’ve never seen anything like *that!*’ Luru blushed and Nguyễn nodded.

There was a shot of colour overhead. The same fishes had grown wings and flew like birds towards the trees lining the river bank, where they darted noisily among branches taking their pick of luscious fruits and berries. Two of them headed back and landed on the side of the friends’ leaf-boat. Luru held his breath, mesmerized by the birds’ rainbow patches of vibrant colours that made them appear more like moving to him, edible animals, fruits and flowers made from glutinous rice powder. Watching them, he remembered fondly the children’s treats available during Tết and festivals, and hoped his attention would not scare the unreal-looking birds away. The birds looked at him with curious eyes of concentric coloured rings: one in deep purple, the other in shades of palm-green. *What is this place?* He had not heard or seen, even in books, such brilliant creatures. He wished he could capture, only in paintings as words would not suffice, these glorious images to share with his mother, who had always been as eager as a child about any new discovery.

As the boats slowed on approaching a dock, seven white birds in an arc formation appeared from the east. They landed on the friends’ boat with three birds evenly spaced on each side and the middle bird on the tip of the leaf, where it tweeted to the girls. Thảo beamed, while Tuyết nodded and replied to the messenger.

‘The Mistress of the Cloud Castle sends her greeting to you both, and invites us all to her mid-day meal,’ Tuyết told Luru and Nguyễn. A raft of happy noises came from the girls on both boats.

‘Please send her our thanks and say we’re looking forward to seeing her soon,’ Luru told Tuyết.

The friends watched fascinated as Tuyết translated the message to the flock. And, to their utter delight, the birds’ intelligent faces all turned to Luru and Nguyễn with a happy-sounding tweet before taking off.

‘They’re wishing you a good day,’ Tuyết translated.

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The boats docked. They disembarked and followed the girls walking through vast vegetable and flower fields laid out like patchwork spreading as far as the eye could see. They were in a region known as the Middle Plain, Tâm told the young men. They stopped by some orchards on the

way, where they were greeted warmly and offered freshly picked produce, most of it unknown to the friends.

Conversations stopped when Luru and Nguyễn began tasting the fruits. The friends abandoned themselves to their senses as they savoured indescribable deliciousness. Luru observed, on his hand, a peach-coloured globe with six perfectly symmetrical grooves running vertically from top to bottom. Tasting the fruit that was a tantalising combination of melons and cherry, he was astounded by the incomparable texture of its deep red flesh. Still wondering about its root cultivar, he threw the stone some steps away and was taken aback as it vanished into the soil. A seedling appeared in its place. Luru watched in disbelief as the plant took root, produced leaves identical to the fruit he had just tasted, and, within minutes, grew to its full size. He blinked on seeing flowers bloom and wilt, replaced by green bulbs on thick stalks. Almost immediately the bulbs reached the size and colour of ready-to-pick fruits. Turning to Nguyễn, whose face mirrored his own astonishment, Luru could not contain his fascination.

‘Six times!’ he whispered. ‘Different trees.’

Luru had first noticed this after discarding a mandarin seed by the roadside earlier. He had seen the tree grow as he was finishing the fruit. He was not convinced that it *could* happen and tested again five more times.

‘Was it the fruit or the soil?’ Nguyễn wondered.

Luru shook his head. *Any speculation is equally an attempt at đoán mò, groping in the dark, here*, he reminded himself. ‘Can’t tell,’ he conceded.

Brimming with questions that they kept to themselves for not knowing *how* to ask, the friends quietly observed and followed the girls as they made their way to the hill.

Chapter 5: Mythical Creatures and Fabulous Food

Nguyễn and Luru followed the girls towards the hill that stood behind a wall of giant trees. Some bore ash-green pine needles but their heights were unseen, like most of the unfamiliar trees in the vicinity, whose tops soared into the clouds. Reaching the base of the hill, Luru continued on the stairway among the girls, while listening to their anecdotes about various festive times at the Cloud Castle.

The last to mount the steps, Nguyễn stiffened when the stairs shuddered to motion, carrying the party on a smooth ascent. He looked around before stooping to scrutinise the stone steps for what might have driven them, but found only grass shoots and runners in the gaps. Something touched his shoulder: he was disarmed to find a climber had reached out among the cascades of vegetation on the earth wall to greet him with a pale pink flower. He looked up just as Luru turned around from a few steps above, laughing with eyes.

‘Handy, huh?’ Luru mouthed the words, nodding at the stairs.

Nguyễn blinked and, unexpectedly, he was *imagining* moving timbers down the mountains and large furniture pieces to upper floors. *How marvellous would it be to have these stairs.* He was taken aback by his using ‘marvellous’, a word he did not recall ever using before and – more alarmingly – his joyful submission to *imagination*: something he had dismissed as a waste of time and believed had no place in his busy life. Yet the idea captivated him and fuelled his imagination further, drove him to *see* the possibilities that this helpful thing could speed up his work and ease the loads for others. Standing on the reality of the very thing his mind could not ever imagined, he alternately saw the people and scenery here, *and* how this marvellous device could work on the mountains and in homes back in his village.

Nguyễn caught Luru gazing dreamily at the fields below, and was glad to see his friend looking relaxed and contented, something he had not seen for some time. *He seems at home here.* Unbidden, images of Luru in the orchards and his walking among the girls along the river returned to his mind, but *this* Luru spoke, dressed and looked like a local. *What am I imagining?* Nguyễn shook off the vision, confounded by his strange thinking.

Luru studied the multi-coloured fields spreading to the horizon. Their subtly changing hues appeared to be in direct proportion to the amount of sunlight falling on them. Examining the breathtaking scenery, he noticed every patch of crop added a piece of colour and texture to the remarkable landscape, producing patterns and mysterious motifs on the live tapestry created by

the concerted effort of people and nature. He speculated on possible meanings of certain patterns and wondered if they were purposefully designed or just produced naturally.

Adding to the many unanswerable instances they had witnessed thus far, the striking fields strangely held Luru's attention and inspired a sense of reverence for mystical workings in the natural functioning of this land. He was drawn to the new challenge he has set for himself to make sense – or give up on his attempts – of what he had seen here. Knowledge and truths he had learned from his homeland were inapplicable in this place. He resolved to take things as they came and wondered what Nguyễn had made of their journey thus far. When his view was blocked by a wall of evergreens, as they rounded a curve, Luru looked back at his friend. Nguyễn's dark, powerful figure – with weapons in hand – stood out from the surroundings like a bronze statue in a flower garden. *He's never seemed so lost.* Luru was amused by his memory of Nguyễn's face on boarding the boat and at the bottom of the stairs. *It's his furthest trip from home,* Luru recalled fondly, glad that his friend had had a chance to travel this far.

The stairs ended and the group entered a large garden through an archway covered with jasmine. Sitting on a stone circle was an oval table covered in a white tablecloth with a gold-and-green embroidered runner on the table's long axis. An ornate teapot had been placed near the head of the table; white teacups with matching bamboo-leaves prints surrounded it. Twelve seats. Luru counted quickly and noticed the same number of white pots bearing pastel flowers stationed around the stone platform.

'Cô Minh!' Tâm called out.

Everyone looked towards the great house on the western side of the garden, where a lady had just emerged. The girls greeted her as they met half-way between the house the stone circle. Folding their arms at their chests, the girls bowed to the lady as she greeted each by her name.

'It's good to see you!' The lady spoke warmly. 'I hope you all can stay for the full moon offering tonight.'

The lady and her guests chatted easily as they walked towards Luru and Nguyễn, who stopped and waited near the entrance.

'The garden is bigger than I remembered when we were last here for the Tết Trung Thu,' Trúc said.

'The whole place was filled with lanterns!' Thảo's face lit up at the memory.

'It looked different at night, didn't it?' The lady patted Thảo's arm. 'Maybe we can add something new to this year's celebration, hopefully the weather will be good again.'

The girls chimed in with their ideas. Tall and slender, the hostess stood out, walking gracefully, dressed elegantly in matching cream silk áo dài and pants.

‘Chào các cháu,’ she greeted the friends warmly on approaching them. ‘Please come in.’

Luru and Nguyễn bowed. Luru’s gaze lingered on the hostess’ face. He had seen the same noble countenance somewhere before.

‘Thank you, Mistress, for your invitation,’ Luru said, and Nguyễn nodded.

‘You’re very welcome. You’ve heard the girls, you can call me Cô Minh.’

‘My name is Luru.’

‘And I am Nguyễn.’

‘I heard you’ve just arrived this morning. How do you find it here?’

Luru noticed the Mistress’ large brown eyes on her oval face and the cheerful upturned corners of her mouth were particularly familiar. He was convinced he had also heard a similar voice to hers, and was captured by its soothing cadence. He felt close to recalling who it was that the hostess resembled, but he shut the distracting thought away, searching instead for words to express for the wondrous things he had seen since his arrival that morning.

‘It’s ... unimaginable here,’ Luru gulped. ‘Extraordinary —’

Nguyễn glanced at his friend. Stammering and using superlatives were not like Luru.

‘It’s true,’ Nguyễn said. ‘We’ve seen some incredible things here, today.’

It was Luru’s turn to observe his friend. Nguyễn’s sudden eloquence was a marked departure from his usual bluntness.

Lady Minh invited the guests to some tea. It was a refreshing brew of ginger, honey and lime. The hostess caught up with the girls and acquainted herself with the new guests.

‘What do you do back home?’ She asked Nguyễn.

‘I’m a carpenter, and he’s a physician,’ he replied proudly, nodding at Luru.

‘You both must be busy all year round,’ the hostess said approvingly, looking from Nguyễn to Luru. ‘Would you like to take a walk around our hill? We may have something different in our healing garden to share with you.’

The hostess led the group to the front of the garden, where they started a gentle descent on wide steps that wound around hillocks and garden beds. Following a stone-paved path, they passed orchards and vegetable patches interspersed with feature gardens. Standing out among them were a semi-circular garden delicately scented by families of striking lillies; a tiered plot filled with every known culinary spices and more; parallel grooves cradling rotund watermelons baring their glossy bulge among furry leaves.

Passing groves of unfamiliar trees with masses of purple flowers, some bearing yellow berries, Nguyễn questioned the hostess and learned that these were thanh quan trees, a distant

relative to the geisha girl of the duranta family, whose leaves and berries were toxic to humans, dogs and cats but had no ill effects on birds and butterflies. Hummingbirds and songbirds particularly loved these fruits and gathered from spring to autumn to feed on them. As if responding to the mentioning of their names, a bird began singing overhead, soon joined by a chorus.

Turning into a narrow lane, Lady Minh took the group to a sheltered patch housing a range of herbs and shrubs. Luru recognised some well known medicinal plants, and correctly identified several, at the the hostess' prompting, although their sizes and colours were somewhat different from those his local area produced. Among them were *cam thảo*, liquorice root; *ngải cứu*, Chinese mugwort; *lạc tiên*, bush passionfruit; *cỏ râu mèo*, Java tea plant, *cỏ mực*, false daisy, and *nhàu*, Indian mulberry. Lady Minh introduced to them new cultivars of some curative families, but Luru was particularly impressed with a number of unfamiliar local species, some of which offered cures or relief with every part of the plant, from their pollens to their roots. Most remarkable were the specimens with multiple uses, such as one offering concurrently antimicrobial, antifungal, antihemorrhagic, anti-inflammatory, antifibrotic, antihyperlipidemic and hepatoprotective properties.

Luru was astounded to hear of some species' potency. They could be given directly to patients with little preparation required: rubbing their leaves onto hives, pastes to cover wounds, hot infusions to relieve pains and fevers, cooled infusions for antiseptic rinses. He thought of his days of chopping roots and turning sun-dried slices, followed by hours of desiccating them in wide pans over low heat, grinding stone-hard pieces into powder, long nights spent reducing large pots of ingredients into thick liquids. How much time and effort he would have saved with these super-plants; how many more patients he could have tended.

'I'd give anything to have some of these,' Luru said wistfully.

'You will.' The hostess assured him.

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The path wound around, bringing the group back to the central garden, where the guests were invited inside the Cloud Castle. Approaching the lofty entrance, Luru and Nguyễn looked for heavy timber doors characteristic of the large homes in their village, but were confounded by see-through panels that slid open as the group arrived. Entering last, they turned back just as the panels closed soundlessly behind them. As the girls continued ahead, the friends examined the curious doorway. Nguyễn tapped a door panel with his knuckle, ran his hand across its smooth surface.

'Not timber or stone,' he muttered. 'No hinge!'

Luru nodded. He, too, had been checking the door's perimeter but could not find where, or how, it was held in place. Quietly, each scanned his half of the door, looking for what could have made this thing work so effortlessly. Nguyễn located a small pot plant on his side, while Luru found only a narrow silk painting hung from a bamboo frame on the wall. Luru stifled a laugh at Nguyễn's bewildered face and hurried him on to catch up with the group ahead.

Emerging from an archway into a circular atrium filled with natural light, the friends' attention was captured by a water feature at the centre. Layers of concentric jets created a remarkable resemblance to a lotus bud opening in continuous motion. Surrounding the water lotus, at equal intervals, were white stone sculptures of fantastic beasts, captured in mid-action. Drawn by the atrium's centrepiece, the friends inspected the sculptures, marvelling at the masterful details: scales, talons, fur, feathers and fins. Luru gazed at the rippling muscles on a giant cat as it arched upward on its powerful hind legs. He felt as if he could *hear* it breathing just above his head, with its cheeks drawn back, revealing sharp incisors and prominent canines.

Nearby, Nguyễn traced with his forefinger the ridges on a hoof of a horse-goat creature. He was fascinated by the stone's grey veins spreading like tiny cracks along its length. He stiffened when the foot appeared to shift. He grabbed the creature's ankle. The spur at its heel dug into his palm, he felt the cool stone surface drawing the heat from his hand. Nguyễn looked up and thought he saw a mischievous glint in the animal's eyes. Straightening up, he stared at the horse-goat head: its impassive face betrayed no emotions, unlike the fierce birdform's, or contemplative aquatic creature's on its either side. Glancing at Luru, he caught a look of wonderment on his friend's face before Luru wandered away to a winged creature.

Twelve. Luru completed his inspection of the sculptures, automatically counting at the back of his mind each time he stopped before a new member of the circular assembly. The last sculpture resembled a giant insect with outspread wings. Yet the outline of its body, behind what seemed to be soft folds of clothing, was unmistakably human, with a waist, parallel columns for legs and round knobs for knees. Its face was turned toward the centre, obscured by a shoulder-length mane. *Of course. We're among, not aside, or above, other creatures in this land.*

Luru eyes followed the winged human's to the central feature. *Water.* The creatures were guarding the source of life, a self-renewing spring. *What could an opening sacred lotus bud mean?* Growing in purity? Or peace? He searched for meanings from what he had learned in his homeland, and recalled ca dao verses celebrating the lotus' precious purity.

trong đầm gì đẹp bằng sen

gần bùn mà chẳng hôi tanh mùi bùn ...

nothing is comparable to the lotus in the swamp

near the mud but remains unstained...

Was this something to do with the people's beliefs? Images of the Buddha meditating on a lotus seat, and the Bodhisattva of Compassion standing on a white lotus came to his mind. Or was it about healing? He remembered brews and prescriptions made from various parts of the lotus plant that had been healing people for millennia from a range of ailments. But then there were delicious dishes, both savoury and sweet, made by his people from lotus ingredients. Could this be about longevity? Centuries-old legends of the sacred lotus thrived in the grounds of ancient temples and palaces. There was an account of a thousand years old lotus seed that germinated into a blossoming perennial flower that had inspired his younger self. What a resourceful mystical plant! Which, if *any*, of these meanings was applicable in this new country? *How was one to ask about the meaning of something without learning its history?* There was simply not enough time to ask about this today. He must store the question, with others that had sprung up during that day. Another time.

Walking away, Luru's thoughts returned to the significance of the number twelve in this land. Were they the months of the year? Or the equivalence of the Chinese Zodiac's 'inner animals' that were believed to have contributed to the shaping of people's personalities, depending on the year they were born in? Perhaps they represented other systems unique to this land. Unless he learnt their language and found the right books, the only way he could find out was to ask a learned local person when an opportunity arose. He would also ask about the story or stories of the guarding beasts – since each sculpture bore unusual combinations of different animals' features – and learn their roles in the lives and beliefs of the local people.

Luru looked over to where the hostess was sitting among the girls on upholstered benches and noticed there were twelve cream-coloured seats around the room; each was in a radial line with a sculpture. There was a symmetry and harmony in the design of the circular room that was conducive to reflection and even meditation. He felt he was in a state of equilibrium between two equal but opposing forces: an outward urge to ask about the what, how and why of many new things he had encountered thus far, against an inner pull to remain still; to simply *be* in this place.

Something shifted in Luru's peripheral vision and his thoughts evaporated. In a stone pot nearby, a violet chrysanthemum flower opened to its full size, matured and wilted as he watched. Immediately after the first flower disintegrated along with its leaves and stems, a new bud appeared, proceeding fluidly through its life cycle. He reached the pot just as the third flower fell. Seeing now the familiar flower complete its life cycle, he relived the wonder of watching the fruit trees' phenomenal growth in the morning. There were more pots of placed between the

seats around the room, each contained a different plant, some bore fruits instead of flowers. A few seats away, Nguyễn was mesmerised by a sky-blue rambutan-like fruit shedding its bristly hair in one smooth swipe as if an invisible hand has pulled off its coat. The look on Nguyễn's face reminded Luru of serendipitous moments in their childhood.

Lady Minh led the group through the airy, light-filled Castle. Sparingly furnished, the soft-hued interior housed few practical items with minimal decorations. Now and again, they paused to admire views of the Plain and distant Valley through the windows and sections of see-through walls; but most of the time, the friends' attention was riveted on discoveries within: a vertical tube lifted the group to another floor; furniture collapsed into compact benches or expanded to divans according to users' needs; movable walls gave way to people or disappeared into the ceiling when the space was occupied. Intrigued by intelligent and efficient designs, the friends searched for mechanisms enabling such effortless implementations but found no clues to their workings.

As the group took a break on the top floor, Luru tuned in to the strains of soothing music that had been filtering through the lofty castle. He was entranced by ethereal singing in the local language accompanied by flutes and string instruments. *This* is what makes this place a Castle, he decided. His thoughts soon dissipated as stillness spread through him, and for some time, he was only aware of his breathing. He felt as if he was a vessel gradually filling with tranquil sounds, no longer troubled by the where or the how mysterious workings were accomplished in this place, despite being aware that he had not seen any musician or instruments contributing to these performances. *This* was the way of living here. Luru noticed his companions, too, were absorbing the scintillating sound stream, each relaxed into their own reflective quietude.

'Do you own this place?' Nguyễn asked Lady Minh on their way down, again.

'Own?' The hostess considered his question. 'No, we don't own anything here. We're carers of the land and the creatures that dwell in it. This Hill,' she spread her arm about her, 'was given to me to look after, when I came of age and could navigate all the Levels of Space in the Realm, alone.'

Nguyễn bowed, unable to find words to express his fascination.

Returning to the garden, the party found food and drinks were laid out for them on the oval table. Among baskets of luscious fruits in the centre was a striking pyramid arrangement of orange gladioli, white carnations and miniature bamboo, with vases of lilies on either end. Food in a spectrum of colours, shapes and textures served in platters, pots and bowls covered the remaining space, with sets of rice-bowls and chopsticks around the perimeter. *Eleven sets*. Luru

counted quickly, noting the meal was prepared for the eleven people present: the hostess and the eight girls who came with the two of them. He had not seen any other person since their arrival, and this setting confirmed that no-one else was involved. *Who prepared this then, when Lady Minh has been with us the whole time?* He caught the quizzical look on Nguyễn's face.

'Take a seat,' Lady Minh invited her guests as she moved around the table, pouring a golden drink into their cups.

The girls settled around the table, leaving two places for Luru and Nguyễn opposite the hostess, who had taken a seat in the middle of one longer side. Lady Minh welcomed the young men to the Realm with the first drink, and in return, the friends thanked the hostess and their new friends, and also drank to the hospitable land and its carers. The golden liquid was one of the best wines the friends had ever sampled. Full-bodied with a fruity bouquet, its chilled, velvety taste melted into their tongues and turned into a liquid heat that intensified every sensory stimulus. Savouring its potency, Luru recalled heady runs among ripe orchards in the heat- and colour-filled summers of their childhood.

Lady Minh invited her guests to the food, and, just like at home, each member invited the hostess in return, extending the invitation to each other before helping themselves. Nguyễn picked up his rice-bowl and chopticks, the aroma of steamed rice turned his thoughts to the unmissable smell of family meals and he felt instantly at home. Sampling new dishes, the friends learned about the unfamiliar produce grown in this land; about the ingredients and cooking methods; how to tell when different vegetables were ready to be picked; and what preparations were required to best retain nutrition and flavours, as most were served raw or very lightly cooked.

The friends attempted at first to learn the unfamiliar names of fruits, vegetables and various ingredients, but soon abandoned the exercise. Yet they noted velvety maroon pods with pearly pink beans, whose taste was a cross between roasted nuts and creamy coconut corn chè, but more addictive than either. Luru considered a wide plate containing two concentric circles of small cream buns like plump flowers with radial yellow lines. He was astonished by the firm flesh and unexpected aroma of citrus nectar released with his first bite. Raw mushroom! He wished they could learn the horticultural skills of the growers in this land to share at home.

Nguyễn picked a thick slice of a cucumber-kind with sparkling purple flesh, whose crystal seeds popped between his teeth, releasing a burst of fresh sweetness. Its taste brought back a long-forgotten memory of a childhood delight: tasting a single drop of clear nectar nestled between the folded red lips of a miniature succulent flower on a mountainside. Noticing Luru relishing the green côm cake, his eyes still on a little square remaining in his bowl, Nguyễn

recalled himself enjoying several triangles of silk bean curd dipped in honey-soy-ginger sauce. *We haven't eaten this much since our ravenous teen days.*

The sun emerged from behind the clouds and Nguyễn noticed a shallot-pink root turning a dark red. Fascinated, he asked the hostess about the curious transformation and learned that some vegetables were affected by sunlight. Lady Minh also pointed out some opalescent leaves among a handful of globes and roots, whose colours and flavours were intensified the longer they were exposed to sunlight. The conversation turned to weather, when Luru commented on the mild day on the hills here compared to their village's midsummer heat.

'How far away is your village?' Lady Minh asked him. 'What is it called?'

'It's called Tĩnh Vân. It's some hours walk from here, not too far.'

'Tĩnh Vân ... I have not heard of it. Has anyone?' She looked around the table, the girls all shook their heads.

'They came from beyond the waterfall,' Phụng volunteered.

'That's further than our travels,' the hostess nodded. 'It's beyond our borders.'

She stood to pour a round of lemon-coloured drink from a decanter.

'So have you been to other parts of our Realm? Did you visit the Valley of Sounds or the Water Temple, or any place else?' She looked at Luru and Nguyễn.

'No —' Luru put down his cup but his mind carried on analysing the drink's mesmerising taste, identifying only some familiar flavours. *Lime, mint, pineapple ... cinnamon?* He steered his thought away from unidentifiable ingredients in the bewitching drink, perceived the significance of the places she had mentioned but found nothing to help him guess what they were.

'We haven't been. We went hunting last night and were lost —'

Reactions around the table surprised him. Thảo's and Tuyết's startled looks were unmissable. He felt foolish not knowing why his simple response produced such effect.

'Hunting?'

'What for?'

The girls asked at the same time.

'Wild hogs. We were hunting wild hogs.' Nguyễn chimed in.

'Hogs? Are they threatening your village?' Lady Minh's measured tone and mild expression did not seem to match the alarmed faces around the table. Some girls glanced at the weapons among the men's packs in the corner.

Nguyễn caught Luru's guarded look and tried to lighten the conversation.

‘No. We just hunt them for meat and other ... things —’ He stopped as Hoà covered her mouth with her hand, her eyes wide.

‘Do you ... *e-eat* them?’ Trúc whimpered.

A hush fell over the gathering. The friends looked over the table and recalled seeing no meat in any dishes served. They had never known any vegetarian in their homeland except for the Buddhist monks and nuns.

‘Yes, we ... do, but —’ Luru struggled to find an acceptable explanation.

‘We also hunt for their tusks ...’ Nguyễn pitched in but stopped short, seeing the girls’ shocked faces.

‘Tusks?’ Thảo gasped, looking from the weapons to Nguyễn. ‘Are they large?’

‘Yes,’ Nguyễn nodded, ‘and fierce.’

‘Do they ... *attack* people?’ Trúc asked.

‘They do, people and animals. We can get killed, and eaten too, if we’re alone or carry no weapons.’

A tense silence descended over the garden. Fear and incomprehension on the girls’ faces around the table shook the friends.

‘We’ve heard of tales of hunting and of wars from distant lands,’ Lady Minh reflected.

‘But *never* here. No *keeling*...’ Tâm’s whisper was echoed by assenting sounds from around the table.

Luru remembered, as a boy, once he had asked his mother on leaving the temple after a Buddhist celebration about why there were no meats in all the dishes. His mother had waited until they were away from the crowd before answering him, lowered herself on her heels to bring her eyes to level with his.

‘Vegetarian meals do not incur pains on animals. It’s one of the ways to minimise suffering.’ There was a hint of anxiety in her voice, her eyes searched his face for understanding.

‘Is that why we don’t keep animals for meat, or slaughter live ones for celebrations like other families?’

The question had come before he could rephrase it better. Luru had noticed most families, including Nguyễn’s, kept animals for special events, but not his. He remembered his parents had gently refused live animals as gifts from patients, and for that, he was sometimes teased by village boys about his parents not accepting such generous gifts due to their inability to kill animals, insinuating cowardice as the cause. He *knew* his parents were not cowards but could not explain to the boys something he himself did not understand. He had wanted to ask his parents

about it, but somehow the thought had never occurred to him when he was at home. Then he remembered how his mother had religiously observed ăn chay, vegetarian meals, around new-moon and full-moon days, as well as a few other days during the month; even when there were meat dishes for his father and for himself, she would not touch them on those days, nor fish sauce or any animal product.

‘Is that why you observed ăn chay days during the month?’ He added, noticing his mother’s soft intake of breath at his first question but was yet to answer him.

His mother had nodded. ‘Yes, my son. And yes.’ She had hugged him, relief was on her face. *Less suffering for animals.* He had understood then. But he loved meat, like all the boys, and participated in hunting, like most village men.

Luru realised he understood his mother more through these ladies, and felt a profound connection to the people and this land. *Our ways of living might be different, but we were still linked by some shared beliefs and practices. We were not that far apart, after all.*

Chapter 6: Unheard-of Nutrition and A Different Kind of Drunkenness

‘Have you tried the new season’s salads?’ Lady Minh called the guests’ attention back to the food. She pointed to oval plates on either end of the table containing white and green shreds scattered with fresh chilli specks, and shallow bowls holding dark red strips. ‘Let me know what you think.’

Nguyễn grabbed a serve from the first dish, recognising the white shreds as young coconut, guessing green papaya was the other main ingredient, but was clueless about the translucent white strips in the mixture. A deliciously tangy taste took him by surprise. On the second inspection, he noticed the green shreds were not young papayas’ semi-transparent flesh, which has a mild sweetness. Green *mangoes*! He recognised it now from both its taste and texture; appreciating the freshly ground birds-eye chilli that brightened the look of the dish as well as intensified its flavour with an enduring heat. *What was the white crunchy thing?* He took another mouthful, savouring the mango’s tartness well balanced by the coconut’s creaminess, all held together by a mild soy dressing. Enjoying a few more chopsticksfull of the salad but still unable to identify the other *crunchy thing*, he gave up and asked the hostess about it.

‘Ngó sen,’ Lady Minh said, ‘didn’t you have lotus stems before?’ She looked at the friends. Nguyễn shook his head, his mouth was full.

‘Yes,’ Luru said.

His mother had made ngó sen dishes before, but it was a treat they seldomly had that depended on trips to the lowlands as there was no lotus pond in the mountains. He was enjoying the amazing red salad but was keen to sample the new ngó sen recipe. He had tried various beetroot dishes, but it had never occurred to him that this versatile root could be used in a salad with such a stellar result; relishing the play of contrasting flavours to the best effect: earthy sweetness of parboiled beetroot was paired with zesty lime dressing; while the crunchy texture and rich aroma of chopped roasted peanuts were balanced by cool-tasting, fragrant mint, all tossed together to create a delicious and nutritiously balanced dish.

Luru thought of his mother, a passionate cook, whose artistic talents and innate creativity were irrepressible, despite relentless restrictions from her aristocratic upbringing. He often wondered about her persistence in pushing barriers – in both the black- and shadow-meanings of the word – to become a poet, songwriter and a stage performer. Against her parents’ counsel, she had married the love of her life and chosen to live away from the privileges afforded by her noble family. She had raised a family without any support from their extended families, and had

funnelled her energy into her children's nutrition and education. *There is still much of my parents' lives I don't know about.* He was inspired by her passion for *quality* in all aspects of living. In any task she had undertaken – whether it be cooking or composing, teaching or reciting – she had given her all, and her accomplishments were always beyond expectations. He knew his mother would enjoy these new dishes, and was certain, on hearing about them, she would try her hands at remaking them.

Appreciating the exceptional food, Luru asked about farming methods that yielded such high quality produce. Phụng told him the trees fed essentially on the same food as people, in raw or preserved form. She added, as an afterthought, that they were also given daily doses of singing and suitable seasonal nourishment from the Valley of Sounds to aid their growth, depending on the type of plant.

‘*Singing?*’ Nguyễn assumed he has misheard. Luru, too.

‘Of course, trees listen.’ Lady Minh said breezily. ‘Nourishing sounds are vital to their well-being as much as they are to humans. Just like other supplements, they are essential for growth and contributing to the quality of the produce.’ She paused for a moment. ‘I’ve been to some provinces where sound nutrition was not administered to plants and their produce was not the same.’

Nguyễn and Luru remembered the beautiful singing at the Flower Valley and in the orchards.

‘How do you bring back nourishment from the Valley of Sounds?’ Luru asked.

‘How is it made?’ Nguyễn was curious.

‘The producers play instruments and sing in different tones, creating different ... moods, then store them. The growers come with their fruits and ask for the types of nourishment they need,’ Phụng said.

‘The nutritionists at the Valley of Sounds are perhaps the busiest people in our Realm, you know,’ the Lady Minh said. ‘They work at all hours but there are always new requests for people or plants and creatures that need supplements. I often bring home some new vials when I visit them.’

Luru remembered the ethereal music wafting through the Castle; its mood enhancing effects were indisputable.

‘They must be expensive to buy?’ Nguyễn asked.

The women exchanged puzzled looks, then Phụng cautiously asked about ‘expensive’ and ‘buy’. Nguyễn was surprised at the women’s lack of knowledge of such basic concepts and wondered how the locals conducted their everyday tradings. Luru volunteered a simple

explanation about buying and selling, and mentioned money. The ladies listened attentively, recognising a different method to their way of sharing resources. Some girls asked more about money, something as foreign to them as sound nutrition to the young men. Nguyễn told them about coins and asked how the locals bought and sold goods without money.

‘We offer them fruits or silk or whatever we have, and they gift us what we need. Sometimes people have urgent requests for supplements and do not have time to prepare gifts in a hurry, that’s all right and they still can have their tonics,’ Phụng explained.

‘We share what we have, sometimes not in direct exchange. There’s always more than enough to go around,’ Lady Minh concurred.

In the relaxed atmosphere, the hostess and her guests enjoyed their food and drinks and learned more about ‘common’ customs for one group that were fascinating to the other. At one point, Nguyễn remembered the women spinning silk in the pretty huts and asked about their work. Trúc explained to them the processes involved, as she sometimes helped with her sisters’ work. The friends listened, unexpectedly captivated, as Trúc outlined how the sun-silk was harvested, woven and preserved before being made into clothes.

‘That’s why your clothes don’t get wet!’ Nguyễn exclaimed, his eyes bright with excitement at the discovery.

‘Do *yours*?’ Trúc’s raised pitch and astonished look sent the girls into a giggle.

‘They do. And when soaked through, they’re heavy and plastered to your body.’ Luru chuckled, remembering the mishaps he and his friends had had on their fishing trips.

Luru recalled seeing the young women emerging from the river that morning. Not only were their clothes dry, but also their hair. His thoughts drifted to the silk-spinners in the huts; he had caught glimpses of their beautiful faces, and heard their *voices*: they were out of this world ...

‘It would be hard for a man, or his parents for him, to choose a bride here ...’ he thought aloud, taking another sip of his lime drink.

‘*Parents*? Why *would* your parents want to choose your bride?’ Tuyết asked, scandalised.

‘Why?’ Luru repeated, himself unsure.

He recalled his parents’ attempts at finding him a bride, as most parents do, when their children have come of age. It was only natural that parents, especially elderly ones, wanted to see their children settle down before they joined the ancestors, but he hadn’t agreed to any match they had suggested. He had never been attracted to anyone.

‘I know they only want the best for me —’ Luru reflected quietly.

‘What if either party doesn’t *choose* the other?’ Tâm sounded concerned.

‘It’d be harder for them, I suppose, but arranged marriages were common where we came from.’ Luru said. ‘The matches are often made between families of similar social standing. Some parents agree to their children’s betrothals when they are still young. Sometimes the young people can have their final say,’ he added wistfully. *But not everyone has a choice.* He looked away.

‘If you can’t find a bride yourself, are you expected to agree to your parents’ choice?’ Hòa queried sympathetically.

Cha mẹ đặt đâu, con ngồi đấy. Wherever your parents put you, you stay, the old teaching rang in his ears. ‘I don’t know,’ he admitted.

A pang of guilt at the thought of his parents overshadowed Luru’s feelings. *Shouldn’t making them happy be my first priority?* Having no siblings to share both the attention and responsibilities, he felt at times weighed down by the expectations as much from himself as from his parents. Glancing at Nguyễn, who sat in quiet contentment, he thought of his friend’s engagement with Hiền: their love was approved by both families, a blessing not many couples who made their own choices enjoyed. *My parents too.* His father and mother both had ‘lost’ their respective family in choosing to marry someone their parents did not approve. Neither of his parents would talk about why their marriage was opposed by grandparents on both sides, but he had gleaned likely reasons for their dissent from snippets of their conversations, mostly in relation to his choosing a future bride.

‘Your mother was meant to be married to a nobleman or royalty, you know,’ his father once said. ‘Her precociousness as a child was renowned among the upperclass families. Then her beauty and talents had made it harder for her parents, with matchmakers’ regular visits, asking for her as a potential match to the king’s cousins and various nobles’ sons since she was very young. But her parents delayed their choice and waited for her to pick one who best suited her,’ he sighed, ‘among *them*.’

‘Why are you sad? She picked you!’ his fifteen-year-old self had said.

‘Yes, she’s a rare one among the upperclass people who didn’t mind marrying below her family. After we were married, there were still talks about how she could have been the king’s Counsel, if she was a man, with her formidable knowledge and intellect, or married to one of the princes.’

It was a scandal, and his mother’s parents were partly blamed for her ‘rule-breaking’, when it was known that her father had yielded to his precocious daughter’s persistence. She could recite entire works of epic poetry from the age of three, and he had appointed the best

scholars to tutor her, in private, all princely studies, except for weapon training. By the age of twelve, she had secretly read and learned by heart their entire library of History, Arts, Philosophy, Politics and Military Strategy. They only discovered this when a pompous mandarin had made a wrong quote in their family banquet, and she had subtly alerted him to it. That had started an uproar, which led to the correct volume of the Military Strategy series being retrieved and *her* reference verified. Her private study was terminated as a result, and she was forbidden access the library without supervision from then on, so she had poured her enthusiasm into poetry and songwriting. A few years later, her voluntary performance at court, as a stand-in for a singer who fell ill during the show – to save the troupe from punishment – had brought her as many troubles as attention for her talents. Watching a public performance a few years later, Luru's father, a young physician from a humble background, was captivated by the breathtaking performance – and performer – and had sought her out *because* he had known nothing about her. Thus started their forbidden romance that had intrigued and inspired Luru. It was a story he was yet to learn in full.

‘So instead of living in manor houses, or even the palace, with maids tending to her needs, your mother ended up in a remote village with a common physician, doing commoners’ work,’ his father had sighed.

‘You’re *not* common, father. You’re the *best* physician not only in these areas but also in the capital. Mother said the nobles and even royal family summoned you before I was born.’

‘They did. Yet part of me wondered if it was not my skills, given the number of talented physicians in the capital who would arrive within a tea-drinking session, but their desire to see the commoner your mother had chosen over their precious sons.’ His eyes were saddened for a moment. ‘Ah, let it go, son. Don’t let your old father’s doubt cloud your sky.’ He took a deep breath. ‘But you *can* marry anyone you choose.’ He spoke brightly, his warm eyes had held Luru’s and a rare full smile deepened every line on his face. ‘I wonder what your bride will be like, who will hóp hòn my boy.’

‘I don’t like any girl!’ He had protested.

‘Just you wait.’ His father had laughed.

The exchange with his mother some years later was more serious. He had just turned eighteen, a ripe age in most parents’ and grandparents’ eyes for youngsters to settle down and start a family as his peers had already done. His mother had asked him to put aside an afternoon for her. After a heartfelt preamble, she produced a list of names of young ladies from suitable families, whose parents had, in principle, agreed to their match. He had scanned the list and, as

he came across a name, had tried his best to jog his memory for each girl's face, mannerisms or voice.

No. No. Nooo. He had groaned inwardly. *She's too loud.* He recalled Trà bellowing to her younger siblings. *Not this one! She's too young.* Linh's only thirteen! *This is impossible. She's cranky all the time.* Lua's face, at seventeen, unlike her name, Silk, was permanently furrowed with frown lines, her mouth was frozen in a sneer. It was even harder to hear, or speak to her. He had thought he had offended her in some way, even when they had barely met, but was told later that she treated him the best. He had wondered how her high-class upbringing and pampered life could produce such an unhappy face. *Definitely not this one!* Tính, Elder Lực's granddaughter, was always nervous regardless of where and when they had met. Her constant distress would not help her, or himself, to care for the sick or wounded, not to mention managing the mountains of work after hours that a physician and his wife must share, sometimes late into the night.

'Anyone you like?' his mother had asked tentatively.

He swallowed. Sighed. 'Please mother, not *now*.' He had pleaded and noticed her nervous hands twisting together in her lap.

'Have you checked the whole list?'

He scanned quickly to the bottom. A few names brought up pleasant memories. Friendly faces. Genial manners. *I know nothing about them*, he wanted to say.

His mother waited.

'There're *some* ...' He couldn't go on.

'We can arrange —'

'Wait! Give me some time ...' He was pained by not being able to make any progress given her time and effort, and felt worse for having disappointed her yet again. 'Let me think it over, please?'

His mother had nodded. She had folded the sheet with unusually clumsy hands and returned it to her tunic's pocket. He had wanted to reassure her, but how could he make a promise when he still doesn't know if he could fulfil. He felt as if his mother could read his mind.

'We want you to know we'll be happy with *anyone* you choose,' she assured him. 'Even girls *not* on the list,' she added.

He was surprised. Most parents would want not only the best match for their children but also to have a say in their choices. His marriage would be the only one for his family. It would only be natural if they insisted on certain conditions, such as the girl's domestic

accomplishments or her lineage. Not that he had paid much attention to what had been discussed directly or indirectly with him. *This is serious*. He had promised that, for his mother's sake, he would pay more attention from then on, when he was in company of young ladies.

'Your father married me against his parents' will, you know. It pained him to move away from his family, but he wanted to protect me from any insinuation or names calling.' She sighed.

What? My genteel mother was called names? Why?

'Luckily your father thought differently about my singing and performing. He saw my poetry and songs as works of art. He valued them. He was angry – I don't think you've ever seen your father angry – when others insinuated that stage performers were *xuong ca vo loai*, non-species.'

Luru had been stunned. He recalled listening to his mother reciting poetry and singing, lying curled up in her lap or in the crook of her arm when he was very young, or looking up at her sitting on the flat rock, from his spot on the grass patch in their front garden, drinking in her voice so warm and pure. Her singing and storytelling were enchanting. When he was young, he had imagined her a fairy in disguise, because she was incomparably good at *everything*. He had never known she was a singer and stage performer as a maiden. He was thrilled by the thought that his mother had performed in front of crowds, setting people's hearts and minds afire.

'Your singing was wonderful,' he found himself saying, seeing his mother again through a child's eyes.

'I'm glad you liked it too,' she patted his hand. Suddenly he saw glimpses of his mother in her younger days. Her wistful smile could not obscure her passion, the joy from her eyes was infectious. He could imagine how his father was bewitched by her singing, just by watching her pouring herself into the songs, transferring her heartbeats into words and breathing life into music.

'Why did you stop singing?'

'I had to as soon as he proposed. I only knew then the reason for his family's opposition and how much he had endured to make it. Especially with your father's work, he attended to people from all walks of life, it would have been a burden for him to continue weathering pressure from society for something I loved doing,' she sighed. 'But, he had determined to leave them all behind by taking us far away, not only from the capital, but also the villagers. He bought us this hill apart from all other dwellings so that, as he had told me, "you can sing, any time, to your heart's content".' Her face had lit up like the summer sky after the rain.

He had wondered about his parents' love; about how they had endured being cut off from their families through all those years; of losing, one by one, seven of their babies; of a lifetime of

secrets they had shared. *One day I will insist on hearing each telling his and her own part of their stories, and will record them to keep alive their memories.* If he was ever to marry, Luru had decided, he would try to fill his parents' house with a large family just as they had dreamt, when building their house: his father had recreated a reduced version of his beloved wife's childhood home, his maternal grandparents' manor.

Luru recalled seeing his mother's face on meeting her friends' grandchildren. He could imagine his parents' joy on seeing their home bustling with children, noises and activities. Sometimes he had wondered what it would be like growing up among a large family surrounded by relatives. He had dreamt of sharing celebratory meals among grandparents, aunts and uncles. He had wished that he could have riotous times with dozens of cousins like Nguyễn had, on family anniversaries and festivities. Luru knew there would be unavoidable conflicts and some odd cousins, like Bách, in any extended family, but they were still a small price for having a big family, a dream that could never be for him.

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Luru turned towards the sound of three stately young women in white áo dài coming through the garden arch. Approaching Lady Minh, who greeted them warmly in their language, the girls bowed and greeted her, then one handed her a scroll. Opening the pearly parchment, the hostess read the message containing symbols unknown to the young men: some were similar to botanical features, while others resembled insects or birds in flight. Laying the scroll down, Lady Minh left her seat to pick some white flowers in a pot nearby. Spreading the petals in a layer on the table, she laid her hands over them, gently pressing her fingertips over overlapping edges, where the petals merged together to form a silken sheet. The friends watched on, spellbound, but no longer baffled by just another of the many extraordinary abilities of the people in this land. Lady Minh removed an ebony hairpin from her bun and drew similar marks on the sheet. Once finished, she rolled it up and passed it to the messenger.

Their errand done, the visitors caught up with the girls at the table and extended their greetings to Luru and Nguyễn. They introduced themselves as three sisters: Trinh, Thanh and Nga.

'Come to our midsummer offering tomorrow night,' Trinh, the oldest, invited Luru and Nguyễn. 'All our friends here are coming.'

'We're just on the other side of the Valley,' Thanh added to nods from the girls around the table.

The youngest sister, Nga, only smiled. Drawn by her quietness, Luru considered her face, which transcended beauty and goodness, but encompassed the purest and brightest essence of

both. A spark of something like panic took hold of him. Words seemed to flit around in his head. It took some effort for him to make a simple reply.

‘Thank you for inviting us.’ He tried to slow his breathing in an effort to compose himself. His heart thumped as if he had just made an uphill run. ‘We will have to postpone it till another day,’ he gulped, ‘but we will def ... definitely visit you. Next time.’ He could not take his eyes off Nga’s face.

Thanh said something, but he only heard Nga, who said, ‘come back soon,’ and felt his face grow hot.

Nga’s voice was clear and sweet as her face, but it somehow rendered Luru tongue-tied. Stranger still, there was a mixture of thrill and dread that pierced him each time his eyes caught hers.

Luru dropped his gaze. He was yet to understand this gravitational field with this girl at its centre, but he had already felt an unknown force dismantling his mind, piece by irretrievable piece, all falling inexorably into their orbits around her, gathering speed in their spiralling toward her. *How do I speak to her? What do I do to get to know her?* His insides were burning as if he had taken strong wine or hot liquid. Now and again, he swallowed; his throat was dry, but his hands were warm and clammy.

He wanted to say something just to see her face turning his way, to hear her again. Tormented by his inability to start a conversation with her, bound by an irrational fear, Luru held onto a wisp of hope, gathered from Nga’s friendly tone that she might have paid him a little attention. But doubt rushed in like a beast and tore apart the pale illusion, reminded him that he might have built his hope on nothing more than some friendly words. Desperate for some clues to her feelings, he couldn’t help glancing at Nga once more. A tender look stilled his heart. Luru fervently wished he had not imagined her affection. The thought threw him into a whirlwind of renewed hope and anxiety so intense that he struggled to breathe.

Lady Minh asked the sisters to join them at the table, but Trinh said they had already taken their midday rice and needed to bring her message home soon. The sisters said their goodbyes, looking forward to catching up with everyone again at their place next evening.

Luru was gripped by the urgency of *not letting Nga go* as the sisters walked up the garden. Trembling and feverish as the sisters were leaving, he had no doubt of his feeling for Nga now, but he must know if it was in any way reciprocated. Time was running out.

Has anyone already asked for her hand? Did she even notice me? What are the rules here? Are outsiders allowed? How can I read her thoughts if she chooses not to share them?

Memory of his parents' difficult romance reminded Luru *his* situation might be worse. Nga and her sisters lived in a *castle* just as Lady Minh did – theirs was called the Pine Castle as he had heard, but they were also from different cultures, speaking different languages and, very likely, bound by different customs and expectations. He had no relatives to visit Nga's family on his elderly parents' behalf. For all his reasoning and speculation, he could not stop this wall from growing, and the girl was walking away. Downing the last of his drink, Luru stood up.

'Nga,' he called out and strode toward the trio.

The sisters paused as Luru caught up and stopped a respectful distance away.

'When I return, would you —' he swallowed and steadied his voice. 'May I have an audience with your parents?' His earnest face searched hers for reactions. *I will not have any accompanying family*, he wanted to say.

Nga stepped away from her sisters and faced Luru. Chatter from the table ceased, the garden quivered into silence. Studying Luru's expression, Nga's girlish face turned serious. His hands trembled but his heart stilled when their eyes met. He was almost on his knees when she answered.

'Yes,' Nga whispered, 'I will ... ask my parents.' She blushed and averted her eyes.

Luru reached out and took her hands in his. 'I'll see you soon.' He spoke hoarsely and squeezed her hands, wishing to hold them longer, to hold *her*, before letting her go.

Nga nodded quickly and joined her sisters. Just before they passed through the garden arch, she looked back at Luru and broke into a smile, seeing him still in the same spot with the same expression on his face.

Then she was gone and Luru found himself sitting at the table. He wondered how he had got there. He looked at the people sitting around the table, as if from within a bubble enveloping him in a different space, but saw mostly Nga's face. He was baffled by a peculiar feeling, a strange combination of weightlessness and drunkenness. Being *hóp hôn*, his father had called it! He began to appreciate the meaning of having one's soul being 'sipped' by another, and wondered dreamily about the love story of the person who came up with this fantastic description.

Chapter 7: Unexpected Gifts

The main course was cleared away and các món tráng miệng, desserts and fruit platters took their place on the table.

‘Are any of our sweets similar to yours?’ Lady Minh asked the friends.

Nguyễn reached for a purple pyramid on a square platter and took a bite. He recognised the magenta-plant sticky rice from its unmistakable deep colour.

‘Xôi lá cẩm,’ Nguyễn said as he swallowed. ‘We have these sometimes.’

The sticky rice’s texture, however, was different from their village’s short grains; these were thin and silken with a light fragrance. He took another bite, inhaling the scent of crushed magenta leaves infused into the rice; its heartwarming flavour brought back memories of festive gatherings among his friends and family.

‘Xôi gấc, too,’ Lư said beside him, glancing up from his serve. ‘Ngon thật!’

He returned to his bowl containing a different kind of sticky rice, savouring each spoonful with relish. He remembered the first time he had seen it on the family altar, when he was around two. He had thought the bright orange balls were decorations, wondering what those painted globes were doing among the food bowls. Once the offering had finished, his mother had sat him down with an orange ball on a plate.

‘What’s that, mother?’

‘Xôi gấc.’ She had scooped a heaped little spoon and brought it to his mouth. ‘How is it?’

He had sniffed it first, as always with any new food, and was won over by the hint of coconut and something unfamiliar that smelled nice. He didn’t know what to expect, despite having tried different sticky rice dishes before, but this was *so* good! He chewed it slowly, moved it around in his mouth, reluctant to swallow it.

‘Don’t you like it?’ His mother sounded anxious.

He shook his head, but his mother had misread his answer. He swallowed quickly.

‘More,’ was all he could say and opened his mouth wide, waiting for the next spoonful.

His mother’s eyes had shone as she fed him the next mouthful and the next one, until he had *finished* the plate. Afterward, she had brought him to the back garden and pointed up at a large tree with bumpy-skinned oval globes. ‘Gấc,’ she had said. Next time his mother made xôi gấc, he had watched her cut open a ripe one the size of a medium pomelo, scoop out its orange-red vesicles and mash the soft flesh to mix with sticky rice soaked overnight, adding coconut milk, a little salt, a pinch of sugar and sprinkles of sweet spices. He saw how the gấc’s intense

colour turned the rice mixture into a deep orange even before it was steamed. He had waited for so long that afternoon while it was cooked, before tasting the first spoonful. Completely won over again by its luscious taste, he had just nodded. More. His mother had understood.

They also sampled balls of *cơm rượu nếp than*, fermented black sticky rice, just as they loved it at home. The friends glanced at one another, seeing laughter in each other's eyes and knowing which memory they were both recalling. It was their first time tasting the restricted treat. Sister Suong had warned the ten-year-olds not to have more than two balls each. They had gone back again and again, taking only *one* more each time of the wickedly addictive rice balls fermented in fragrant rice wine. They took tiny bites and ate them slowly, letting the juicy flesh melt on their tongues. The balls were only small. Luru had lost count. Finally, he checked the container, mutedly holding up the half-empty urn to show Nguyễn.

'No!' Nguyễn shoved the urn to the back of the kitchen shelf and they ran to the garden.

Strange things started to happen once they were out of the door. First, Luru noticed Nguyễn was walking weirdly as if he had a sore leg, stumbling every few steps on the paved path. Then Luru tripped himself and fell over the edge on the path wide enough for *three* people, bewildered that he, too, had been unusually clumsy on his feet.

'Let's get some guavas.' Nguyễn's voice was slurred.

Luru nodded and thought he had said 'yes', but didn't hear himself. Nguyễn had already disappeared in the thick foliage of his rampant garden. Luru looked for him but the trees began rocking gently and, time and again, their different shades of green merged together then slid apart. Luru blinked, trying to refocus and find his way to the guava tree. He still didn't recognise his surroundings, even as he followed Nguyễn's voice from somewhere behind the wide sapodilla. When he arrived, calling to his friend, he found Nguyễn hugging the tree, his eyes wild.

'I can't *cl ... climb*.' Nguyễn held out a hand, scratch marks in his palm were beginning to turn red. His knuckles were white on the other hand that clung to the tree, his knees were buckling under him.

Luru ran to Nguyễn and grabbed his hand to steady him but missed it. He stared at his own outstretched hand and wiggled his fingers, but to his dismay, he couldn't *feel* them. He wanted to tell Nguyễn but his tongue wouldn't move. It felt like a wad of cotton in his mouth.

Sister Suong had found the boys sleeping soundly by the tree before sun down and woken them up for the night rice. She had called and called, she said, but neither answered, so she had to search for them in the garden after checking on the urn containing the *cơm rượu*, fermented rice balls.

‘How many, already?’ Nguyễn asked Luru now with a mischievous look.

‘Three, I think,’ Luru replied.

Nguyễn scoffed and shook his head.

‘Hard to stop,’ Nguyễn had admitted to the hostess.

Luru nodded, fully aware of the bewitching taste on his tongue.

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The friends discovered new tastes when they sampled the fruit platters. Among remarkable offers were wedges arranged in concentric circles on a white plate. Both Luru and Nguyễn had thought they were pieces of a cake, with marbled yellow outer layers housing a solid blue centre. They were taken by surprise by the unmistakable cool and crisp melon flesh. But it was the captivating black sesame flavour with an undertone of irresistible essences that prompted them to ask about the fabulous sweet. Lady Minh showed them a knobbly grey-skinned melon she had brought in anticipation of her guests’ inquiry. Both agreed they couldn’t have guessed such humble-looking fruit would house such a marvellous treat.

Conversations flowed as the young men sampled desserts from the thin liquid lotus seed chè hạt sen; to bánh đậu xanh nướng, melt-in-your-mouth baked mungbean cake; brittle peanut-and-sesame glazed candies; and assorted ô mai, spiced preserved fruits. They learned the local names of not only new treats, but also those familiar to them, and listened to different fables associated with some traditional treats; such as what they called bánh phu-thê, the husband-and-wife cake, known to the locals as tình chị em, sisters’ love cake, representing the enduring love of three inseparable sisters, whose loyalty and love had triumphed over adversities.

Lady Minh left the table for the Castle and returned shortly with a magnificent peach on a platter. The girls gasped at the sight of the fruit, while Luru and Nguyễn marvelled at its size and beauty.

‘Is it Đào Trường Thọ?’ Liễu asked excitedly, her eyes caressing the sun-kissed cheeks.

‘It is.’ Lady Minh nodded.

‘It *preserves* health and vitality,’ Hoà gushed, watching Lady Minh deftly cutting and arranging the wedges around serving plates.

‘Illnesses and old-age will not touch you,’ Liễu added reverently.

‘It takes *years* for the trees to grow,’ Phụng reflected.

‘And longer for them to bear fruit,’ Tuyết continued.

‘It’s all true what you’ve said.’ Lady Minh spread three plates along the table, gesturing to everyone to help themselves. ‘This Peach only grows on our Realm’s highest mountains. The trees breathe and drink the purest of air and water, and they are sung to by our Guardians.’

Luru took a wedge. He recognised the peach taste with his first bite, but the similarity ended there. He could not find words to describe *this* fruit's exquisite taste, texture and flavours. Stranger still, in searching for suitable descriptions, his mind recalled bodily experiences instead of words or objects. The Peach of Longevity's cool, crisp flesh and intense tangy-sweet taste brought back a vivid memory of plunging into cold mountain springs that had awakened every nerve cell in his body. Its fragrance and flavours, carrying hints of passionfruit and an unidentifiable blend of summer pickings, brought him same excitement as the month-long preparations and celebrations centred on Tết.

Since his earliest memory, Tết had always been the distinct period when, instead of the usual smells of herbal medications, his house was filled with mouth-watering aromas of bánh and mứt, assorted cakes, fruit conserves and candies his mother had prepared in the weeks leading to the New Year celebrations. He would go to bed with the heavenly scent of vanilla and steamed mung bean seeping into his room from the simmering pot his mother was stirring, and wake up to find neat trays of bite-size squares printed with the vạn symbol, the Buddhist swastika, and boxes filled with smooth balls wrapped in coloured tissue papers like mini pompoms with tassels. When he was older, he had watched his mother select the best ginger roots, peeling and slicing them into stacks of strangely shaped pieces to soak overnight. He had sat with her while she crystallised them in liquid sugar on high heat, shifting piece by piece from a high pile on one side of the wide pot to the other and back again, until the liquid had disappeared and each paper-thin ginger slice was perfectly glazed with a natural coat of dusting sugar. He had learned many history lessons, fables and rhymes, legends and songs during these ginger-scented hours. They had been preserved together with treasured memories of sweet-making times with his mother that always culminated in the most exciting finale: his tasting of the first piece of a finished batch.

The value of traditions, for Luru, had always been tied to his parents' choices and actions in relation to them. Tết's celebrations and ceremonies to honour their ancestors, in the same way, were valued *because* of the days and nights his mother had dedicated to preparing offerings: special treats made particularly to *his* and his father's preference, and her meticulous cleaning and tidying every handspan of the house beyond its already clean and neat condition. Each object on the family altar would be polished until it gleamed, ready for the New Year blessings and offerings. While the adults' focus might have been on traditions and ceremonies, his excitement for this festive time was centred on food-making and season-special treats for weeks after the New Year Day. His part in the preparatory rituals involved monitoring the pot of fermented sticky rice steeped in rice wine until it had ripened into juicy cơm rượu balls, and helping his

mother turn sun-dried winter radish, carrot and green pawpaw lengths to make dưa món to accompany bánh chưng from New Year Day. He took pride in counting for his mother newly added jars of assorted pickles, lining them up by size among rows of preserved food tubs and various meat rolls on the kitchen counter.

The weeks' culinary accomplishments culminated with the making of Tết's centrepiece: bánh chưng, sticky rice cakes; the occasion was an event on its own that took more than two days to complete. The preparations began with soaking rice and mung beans overnight; hulling, cooking and mashing the latter; grinding spices and chopping onions for marinating pork slices; washing and drying banana leaves for covers; then splitting soaked lạt giang, miniature bamboo, for ties. Most of the second day would be spent on assembling each bánh chưng with seasoned rice on the outer layer, cushioned by mashed bean and centred with marinated pork. This was followed by the same layers in reverse order to ensure a perfect symmetry of the contents from any orientation; as the teaching from the Legend had been passed down since the ancient time from the creator, the eighteenth son of the sixth Hùng King. The completed piece was wrapped in banana leaves and shaped into plate-size squares secured with lạt giang. The assembling would be done by night fall, when the overnight boiling of the cakes began. From his teen years, Luru was allowed to stay up with his parents, sometimes with Nguyễn staying over, as they monitored the enormous pot. Those nights they had spent together around the fire, disrupted only by occasional topping up the pot with boiling water, were filled with precious memories and stories that he would not have collected otherwise.

Finishing his wedge, Luru mulled over the Peach of Longevity's taste but was unable to find words for its properties. Remembering this was a rare fruit even for local people, he had no doubt that exceptional care and growing conditions had contributed to the Peach's superior qualities. Glancing around the table, he noticed each person was absorbed in his or her own appreciation of the extraordinary fruit, and watched Nguyễn savouring his segment with a childlike bliss.

'If they are not tended by our people, how do we know where or when to harvest them?' Thảo asked.

'The nuns in the temples at the foot of the mountains know of them. They send messenger birds to the purists when harvest time comes,' Lady Minh replied.

'How often would that be?' Nguyễn asked.

'Who are the purists?' Luru was curious.

‘It takes around twenty seasons for a tree to grow, and almost twice as long for it to bear fruits.’ Lady Minh answered Nguyễn first. ‘Without disruptions, subsequent harvests usually come after thirty seasons or so.’

Over half a century wait for first harvest! Nguyễn’s incredulous eyes met Luru’s, mirrored his astonishment.

‘The purists are the mountain carers.’ Lady Minh turned to Luru. ‘They live on fallen produce and leaves so as not to disturb the trees.’

Luru looked blankly at the hostess. He had momentarily forgotten his question while still processing the incredible amount of time *this* fruit taken to mature, considering the extremely short life cycles for other fruit trees he had seen. He was now trying to grasp new concepts and recognised that, despite their ability to communicate, his inability to *understand* many things here was a result of not only unfamiliar words but the entirely different way of living. To be part of this community, Luru realised, he must put aside much of what he had learned growing up among his people. He wondered when, if ever, he would stop instinctively comparing new findings against what was known in his homeland. The disparity between simple facts – such as a tremendous range of life-cycles of plants in this land – had raised questions in his mind about ingrained customs and knowledge that had formed the foundation of his people’s living. Incomparable discoveries in this land had triggered unexpected tremors to his once unshakable foundation of knowledge and understanding of how basic systems operated the world. Somewhere in the deepest part of his mind, a fissure widened under the weight of awe and doubt that had been accumulating with each new experience.

Unbidden, images of the elemental confluence of Sông Hồng and Sông Đà, the Red River and Black River, came to his mind. He saw again, through his ten-year-old’s eyes, the mighty Red River powering down from the northern mountains, roaring past him with its hillocks and valleys of water, carrying tonnes of red alluvium per second to the lowlands. He had felt its force against the riverbank beneath his feet, and could taste the rich earth in the spray on his face from the raging current that threatened to break the shore in an overnight surge after the rain.

Fear and wonder had gripped him, as a boy, that day on Việt Trì’s shore, as he watched the bulging body of red water, like a living creature with coiling muscles beneath translucent skin. Gorged with heavy rain, the Red River had ploughed forcibly into any opening, sweeping along stumps, debris and everything that had fallen into its path. Yet where it merged with the slender and placid Black River, the red torrent eased and mingled languorously with its companion, until they became one body of hot-brown current coursing steadily down south.

Hypnotised by the tempestuous merging of the two largest rivers in the north, he had learned on the shore that morning that even a bigger and more powerful body could be tamed by a calming influence. That kernel of understanding had been with him ever since, kept secure like a precious stone in his pocket. Attached with it was the rare memory of his father's only instance of uncontrolled emotions. His voice had been hoarse and rough as his painful grip on Luru's arm had alerted the boy to how close he was to being pulled into the river. Luru's feet had already disappeared into the cloudy red water, his trousers were soaked to the knees. His father's words were drowned out by the roaring water, but his fear that had cut deep lines into his face and the terrified look in his eyes had been indelibly etched on the boy's mind.

Emerging from his visceral memory, Luru took in his surroundings and realised that, in accepting the girls' invitation to visit the Valley, he had opened himself and Nguyễn to a different world of ancient wisdom and unseen wonders. He felt a growing attachment to this place, taking in the genteel faces around the table amid the tranquil garden, and had already anticipated a bittersweet farewell.

'It'll be hard to leave after all this —' Luru said quietly.

'You *are* invited to stay,' said Lady Minh to both young men. 'There are private quarters within the Castle and separate dwellings on this Hill have already been prepared for you.'

'We also have garden houses in the Valley,' Tuyết added to the girls' enthusiastic nods.

Luru's heart leapt at the invitations. He took some deep breaths to steady it, but the thought of living locally and seeing Nga more often sent it tumbling more wildly. Fuelled with excitement, his unchecked imagination quickly painted bright pictures of their future together. He saw himself hugging his children and watching them playing with their mother. But something was missing. His parents were not among images of his future family. A pain flared in his chest. The colours drained from his visions as they disintegrated.

Mother. The unlit kitchen splattered her face with its thick and thin shadows, caked her worry lines in charcoal and smeared her eyes and mouth with grey. It had not yet been dark when he departed; Luru was distressed by his strangely altered last memory of her. His chest burned with the anxiety he knew his mother would have been enduring from the moment he left. His heart ached for his father, too, who must have negotiated steep hills and trudged through the village tending to sick and injured people in his absence.

It was simpler for Nguyễn, his heart and mind had always been in the same place. A glance at Luru struck him with the burdens his friend had to bear, alone. *The least I can do is speak for him.*

‘Thank you for your hospitality.’ Nguyễn spoke to the hostess then made eye contact with Tuyết, acknowledging her offer. ‘We’ve had an extraordinary day and it would be beyond our dreams to be able to stay.’ He hesitated on seeing the women’s faces brighten at his words. ‘But ... we both have ties at home, and we’re expected to return.’

‘We will be back,’ Luru announced resolutely, sitting tall in his chair.

The women turned to Luru, taken aback by the intensity in his voice. Sensing the women’s disquiet, Luru fought to contain his turmoil and reproached himself for a curt response to their generosity.

‘My parents are elderly and depend on me as their only child,’ he said earnestly to approving looks from around the table. ‘But it’s ... incomparable being here. I’ll be back —’ he blushed.

Happy faces and noises from the girls saved him from what was left unsaid.

‘We’ll invite the Pine Castle sisters next time. You’ll be back too, won’t you?’ Lady Minh asked Nguyễn.

‘Definitely,’ Nguyễn beamed.

‘Should I invite anyone *special* for him?’ the hostess asked Luru.

Luru paused for a second at the unexpected question and broke into a smile. ‘No, *he* doesn’t need any match-making. He’s already engaged to his childhood sweetheart.’

The girls congratulated Nguyễn.

‘Bring her along next time if you can,’ Phụng urged him, ‘we’d love to meet your bride.’

‘I’ll ask her,’ Nguyễn nodded. ‘I may end up carrying her ... er ... most of the way though,’ he laughed.

‘Not *with* your gear.’ Luru teased.

‘Of course not! We’ll be celebrating, not hunting, and *you*,’ Nguyễn winked at Luru, ‘will be decked out in your finery as a ... a bridegroom.’

Luru’s cheeks coloured as the girls cheered.

Lady Minh poured another round of drink. Luru took a long draught of a delicious dark red juice and recognised a familiar taste. He was pleased to know he had made the first correct guess for the day, when the hostess confirmed it was freshly pressed juice of a black mulberry cultivar known to his people as *dâu tằm*, silk-worm berry, whose leaves were the sole food source for silkworms. He mentioned this but the hostess said that the locals did not keep worms,

harvesting their silks instead from natural sources. Sun silk, Luru recalled, and wondered what the other sources might be, filing yet another question for his next visit.

Luru and Nguyễn emptied their glasses and thanked the hostess for the banquet. Saying their goodbyes, the friends regretted that they had to leave early to ensure their arrival at the village before dark. Lady Minh asked them to wait for her as she went into the Castle. She returned shortly and handed Luru a rosewood box.

‘This contains the seeds and leaves from our healing garden. I hope you’ll find in here what you need for most conditions.’ Her voice was warm and encouraging. ‘Should you find yourself in an emergency, you can crush and use them directly.’

Luru bowed, overcome by the unexpected precious gift. ‘Cảm ơn Cô,’ was all he could say.

‘You’re very welcome.’ A benevolent smile came to her face. ‘The birds know how to distribute the seeds once the trees are mature.’

She turned to Nguyễn, handing him a narrow case.

‘This will help sharpen your tools. It belonged to our late master builder, Trung.’ She said warmly.

Nguyễn thanked her and opened the case, revealing a thin blade mounted on a mahogany handle. He lifted it out, noticing its solid weight for such a small tool; its entire length fitted in his hand. Turning it over, he discovered the blade had two different faces: one was dark metal with a tightly ribbed surface, the other was smooth silver with reinforced edges. Curious about a tiny pin at the collar, he pressed on it and was surprised when the blade folded back into a slit along the handle. Impressed by the tool’s transformation, he gazed at the slender mahogany cylinder in his hand, seeing the blade’s spine as a thin grey strip along the handle’s brown-red body. Nguyễn closed his hand around the solid hilt, pleased to find it fitted so well in his grip.

‘And some fruit for your families.’ Lady Minh held forward a silk drawstring bag. ‘Travel safely and be back soon.’

Luru had heard the same words spoken in the same tone and had *seen* that affectionate smile before. A strange coincidence brought back a memory of when he was seven. He had watched his mother standing on their front veranda, saying the same thing as he was leaving with his father on one of their few overnight trips. Luru understood then the immediate rapport he had had with the Mistress of the Cloud Castle even when they first met, recognising now similarities between the hostess’ features and his mother’s. He wondered whether this unconscious recognition had given him a sense of familiarity in this place.

Luru's eyes brushed over the contents of the bag as he passed it to Nguyễn. Glimpsing assorted fruits through the translucent silk, he spotted a Peach of Longevity.

'We can't possibly — ' Luru said, passing the bag back to the hostess.

'It's our gift.' Lady Minh patted his hand reassuringly. 'It'll be a while before our next harvest. A good opportunity to share with your families, don't you think?'

Lady Minh walked her guests to the foot of the Hill. Waving from the bottom of the stairs, she watched the group departing until they disappeared around a bend.

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Luru and Nguyễn followed the girls back to the Middle Plain. They crossed luxuriant fields laden with seasonal fruits and, once again, sailed away in the two leaf boats up the river. The afternoon sun dropped glittering filaments and foils over the water, plating surfaces along the banks with molten gold. Gliding on the calm river, Luru listened to the ethereal music floating through the air and remembered Lady Minh telling them of its source. He recalled their walking through the light-filled Cloud Castle, seeing once more the magnificent water feature. He wondered again about the meaning of the water lotus and its twelve guardians. He speculated on the significance of a human with giant moth's wings and its meaning to the local people.

What about their beliefs or religions? He did not recall seeing any altar inside the Castle, or indeed, anything resembling roadside shrines like his people erected along the main arteries in honour of local deities, or to console aggrieved spirits of accidental deaths. As well as flowers and incense, offerings of fresh water and seasonal fruit found in those covered shelves were also gifts for travellers on foot, who needed refreshments during their long journeys. He had learned about this on a trip to the lowland, when his mother took an offering to a curious roofed box during a break and he had asked her about it.

'Do the spirits need to be fed because they can't go home?'

'Yes, and the offerings are for travellers, too, after the incense burned out,' his mother had said.

'Do they just help themselves if they're hungry?' The five-year-old boy was aghast at such irreverent behaviour.

'Yes, if they're really hungry, but ... ' his mother had cleared her throat. She had sat on her heels so her eyes were on the same level with his. 'These offerings ... were meant to give more than just food and drinks to travellers. The fresh water encourages the receivers to keep their minds pure, and to reflect on their travels; the flowers and fruits are nature's gifts, but also a

reminder of the impermanence of things; and the incense is to invoke the spirits but also to awake our senses, to be mindful of our surroundings ...’

His mother had paused and searched his face. She seemed worried that she might have overloaded her young son with too much information. But he had understood it. Truly. It made sense. He had nodded enthusiastically and her face had relaxed. Years later, recalling this memory, he realised this was one of his first lessons on Buddhism. And as with most things concerning knowledge, whether it be Astronomy, Mathematics or systems belief and religions, he had learned about them by asking.

Do the locals worship anyone at all? The question brought him back to what he had witnessed in this land he was now leaving. The people here would have been like gods in his people’s eyes. *If there are deities here, what qualities or abilities would they possess?* A list of questions had been growing since their arrival and his newly found love – his face grew hot at the thought of Nga – fuelled his desire for a return soon.

Surrendering himself again to the music, Luru’s thoughts flowed and ebbed, and along with them, his cares and sorrows, his parents’ and his own regrets. Old and recent losses and grief washed away, carried off like onshore debris by the tide, until his mind was clear. Leaning back on the cushioned leaf boat, he saw shapes in the clouds as he had in his childhood. This brought him joy for the limitless possibilities of imaginative eyes.

Appreciating the ephemeral gift, Luru wished, for once, for a slow passage of time so that he could catch and securely store away all the memory bubbles filled with sensory imprints. He remembered the ngụ ngôn fable about a hardworking man carrying water home daily from the river in a leaky bucket, and understood it now from another angle. He was grateful for this illuminating moment that he might not otherwise have enjoyed had they not embarked on this trip. He let his whole being soak in the clarifying and nourishing sounds, aware that all creatures in the vicinity were restoring themselves through the healing music.

Passing again the silk spinners in flower-covered huts and watching splendid birds return to the water and swim away in schools of fishes, Luru and Nguyễn abandoned themselves to their senses. Each in his own way imagined how dream-like it would be to settle here among inhabitants of the Realm, whose extraordinary way of living had taught them so much in one day.

After some time, each friend caught his own thoughts reflected in the other’s eyes. But seeing Nguyễn’s face against an unfamiliar landscape struck Luru with a profound sense of loss. Besieged by a sudden bout of homesickness, Luru felt as if they had been away for a long time. Seeing himself in a distant future, he knew that after the enchantment had settled, he would have

missed the warmth of timber and earthenware; the reassuring presence of farmhouses with their mud walls and thatched roofs; the sights and sounds and tastes and smells of their village and, most of all, the familiar voices and faces of the people they belonged to. He had already felt the ache and knew it would remain an incurable sickness.

The boats docked. The girls walked with Luru and Nguyễn back to the waterfall where they first met in the morning.

‘If only you had a little more time,’ TrúC said. ‘There’s still so much to show you.’

‘We’ll stay longer next time,’ Luru promised.

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The friends skirted the waterfall to the high ground and entered the narrow path leading back to the old forest. The sound of falling water receded as they weaved their way through the rampant bushland, until it was but a faint murmur among rustling leaves. They emerged from luxuriant canopies into a sparse woodland inhabited by stunted trees and straggly bushes.

Luru looked back, once, as they approached the glade. A tangled wall of green, old and dusty as the surrounding woods, had sealed the entrance to the narrow path they had just emerged from. He faltered, thrown by the inexplicable growth that had concealed the entry to the fair country. His dismay turned into despair, when his attempt to trace their footprints back to the exit had found no traces of them on the barren patch they had just crossed. Seized by a numbing blow of finality, grieving now for a diminished hope of returning to the Realm, he staggered away to follow Nguyễn.

The friends crossed the clearing in silence. Passing the copse of spindly trees, they came to the spot where they had stopped briefly at dawn. Nguyễn’s sigh added to Luru’s heavy heart. They started in single file up the dusty path that disappeared into the silent and shadowy forest.

Chapter 8: Part of A Legend

Luru followed Nguyễn on the rough path leading back into the old woods, noticing puffs of dust with his every step on the parched, burnt-orange land. Nguyễn's dark trousers were streaked with grey, his cuffs were plastered with splotches of dried mud. Luru's eyes travelled up to his friend's laden pack, paused on his hands weighed down by weapons. Watching his friend trudge on with his head bowed, Luru imagined Nguyễn's sombre face. *If only we hadn't brought so much*, he sighed. *Our packs are still full* –

Luru recalled that the little space on top of his pack was now filled with Lady Minh's gifts. His spirits lifted at the memory of the rosewood box containing precious seeds and leaves of medicinal plants. The silver drawstring bag sparked his memory of the Peach of Longevity's taste. He savoured again in his mind, relishing its flavours that somehow reminded him of the scent of peach blossoms on early spring mornings. Instantly, he was seeing Nga against the backdrop of the Valley, walking among the flower fields. Her smile set his heart thumping wildly.

The vision shattered when he bumped into Nguyễn, standing frozen, spear in hand.

'Whaa ...' Luru croaked.

'Sshh...' Nguyễn hissed without turning his head.

'Do you —'

A roar cut across Luru's sentence, followed by a deep grunt. The sounds came from beyond a knoll just a short distance ahead. He dropped his pack and unsheathed his sword.

'Get *off* the path!' Nguyễn shouted.

They darted into a small copse of trees and low shrubs on their left. Weapons in hand, the friends fixed their eyes on the track that snaked away and disappeared behind the knoll. Soon a tumultuous mass shrouded in a thick dust cloud appeared and rolled closer until it came into full view. Even before they could make out the shapes in the dirt cloud, the young men already suspected what they were facing. They glanced at one another, each seeing his own terror on the other's face. The fleeting communication was enough to plunge them both into fear, realising they were about to walk into a jungle legend: a deadly encounter between a tiger and a wild hog.

Frozen in their spots, their minds revisited graphic reports by woodcutters, who had found human remains in the vicinity of the fearsome animals' carcasses. One account had become indelible on their minds since a winter night in their childhood. An old hunter had been found with blood-soaked chest and an arm torn off. Barely conscious, his broken words painted a

horrific killing. It began with a handful of men drawn by a terrible fight between a wild boar and a tiger. More hunters and woodcutters ventured near to watch the rare match. Emboldened by the beasts' visible wounds, the circle of spectators closed in. When first the boar, then the tiger, fell from their seeming fatal wounds, the delirious onlookers had poured in for easy kills.

But the beasts rose in their last-ditch effort, turned away from one another and ploughed into the crowd. The old hunter had caught only a fleeting glimpse of the boar mowing down a cluster of onlookers with a sweep of its lethal tusks, just as a huge shadow lunged in his direction. Men fell around him amid screams from all directions. The hunter dived and fell. When he looked up, his face was a hand-span away from the tiger's enormous head. He had ducked away as the blood-smeared jaws snapped. But a paw had found his chest and slashed it to the bones. It grabbed his arm lifted up in defence and ripped it off.

The hunter fell, his eyes following the tiger across the clearing strewn with bodies. He caught the sight of the last survivor, a friend's son, with the tiger at his heels. He heard a gut-wrenching cry when it grasped the lad and rammed him down into the dirt. The hunter had passed out amid the lad's dying moans and the sound of crunched bones.

The villagers found the young man's dismembered body a few steps away from the dead tiger. Cutting open its carcass, they found parts of the lad's hand with some fingers still intact. Long after the dead men were buried, there were still speculations around the fires, albeit in fearful whispers, as to why the tiger had torn his last victim to shreds but eaten very little of him. The hog had had a meal of the last man it had killed. Its stomach contents, although greater in volume, contained nothing recognisable.

Like tinder in an empty hearth, the men's debates had flared and died quickly that night. As they sat huddled together in the communal Hall, a draught had swept into the room, extinguishing all sound. Outside, the moaning wind had risen suddenly into a shriek piercing the night's stillness. The trees groaned and creaked under the wind's lashings, their ghostly shadows clamouring at the windows. Gusts of wind rattled doors and windows like earnest hands beating in to be let in. Luu and Nguyễn had clung to one another, two shapeless smears next to the hunters' distorted shadows on the stained-wood wall. The cold had seeped into the little boys' bones as they sat paralysed by nameless fears fed by their rampaging imaginations.

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The friends' lapse into dark memories lasted for only moments before they were shaken back into the immediate hog-and-tiger battle. The tangled beasts tumbled down the slope and stopped a short distance away from where they were hiding. Gasping and grunting, the separated beasts launched themselves again at one another. The tiger's jaws clamped over the hog's black

shoulder just as a tusk punctured its lower chest. Dark liquid oozed down the hog's body from under its jaws. The hog staggered on its feet but, unwilling to let go, propelled itself forward, ramming its weight onto the tusk until it disappeared into its target. The tiger yanked its teeth away and let out a howl of pain. The hog's laboured breathing came out in shrieks as the beasts untangled themselves. When they next lunged at one another in an explosion of snarls, there were new red patches blooming on the tiger's coat; both of the hog's tusks were coated in red. In an unexpected move, the hog foiled a leaping attack and punctured its opponent's flank with its sharp tusks. The tiger collapsed on its side and, taking gulps of air through its open mouth, its eyes wandered away from its mortal enemy to rest on the bush, where the friends stood motionless. Breathless.

For a moment, Luru saw himself back again in his parents' dimly lit worshipping room, kneeling in front of the family's altar. He could feel his mother's eyes on him as he was praying to the ancestors. He looked toward where she was standing in the narrow aisle between the wall and the prayer mat, seeing apprehension cut deep lines on her face; her small frame was swallowed by the thick shadow of the tiered ancestral shrine. Incense smoke stung his eyes; his mother's face became blurred. Panicked, he reached out, trying to reassure her. *I'm sorry* —

His hand met a warm, muscled arm. Luru blinked and found himself staring into Nguyễn's face. 'It's ... the heat,' Luru mumbled. 'I was —'

An uproarious mass hurtled towards them and slammed into a nearby shrub, where it exploded into a frenzy of snarls and thrashing, interspersed with grunts and cracks. Guttural squeals became chillingly human-like screams. Luru swayed and stepped back. His foot landed on a low-lying branch. Snap.

The tiger whipped its head around. A heap of black bristles fell at its feet, spasming. Nguyễn's bones numbed as the tiger's eyes located Luru, teetering to regain balance. The tiger's nostrils flared. A guttural hum escaped the blood-stained mouth as the tiger pounced.

Nguyễn swung Luru to the ground with one arm and thrust his spear at the tiger. The tiger landed with the spear through its neck and a paw on Nguyễn's chest, pinning him to the ground. He stared at the tiger's enormous head above him. Nausea engulfed him as hot breaths fanned his face, reeking of blood and rotten meat. Of *death*. Terror wiped Nguyễn's mind blank and jellied his bones.

The tiger's ears pricked up. Luru slammed full-force at its flank, throwing it off Nguyễn. Struggling to its feet, the tiger located Luru's prone form a few steps away. Nguyễn dived for Luru's sword and plunged it between the tiger's shoulders, hearing only his hammering heart.

The tiger swayed on its feet and keeled over. Blood bubbled from its mouth and the neck wound, where the embedded spear was shuddering.

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After some time, Nguyễn approached the carcass but stopped short of removing his weapon. Dejection washed over him at the sight of the dead animal, its magnificent coat marred by fresh and dried blood knitted into crusty patches dotting its body. *Tusk holes*. An image came to his mind of the hog burying its head into the stripy orange flank. He looked for the hog's carcass near the shrub, finding a cloud of flies had already assembled over it.

Luru had been in a strange state of paralysis the moment his sword pierced the tiger's back. Waves of agony tore through his body, his eyes darkened; he felt as if his heart and lungs had also stopped, like the tiger's, until Nguyễn shook him out of the stupor. Nguyễn was startled by Luru's white lips and waxen face, but was unable speak. He motioned toward the shrub instead.

The buzzing sound grew louder as they approached the boar's carcass. Sheets of flies rose and touched down on different sides of the dark mound, continually reshaping the mass, making it appear like low bush swaying in the wind. The flies clung hungrily onto the hog's open wounds and still-wet patches of excreta nearby.

Luru and Nguyễn stopped some distance away, assailed by the sickening stench in the mid-afternoon heat. The hog's eyes were open, frozen in agony. Its snout and tusks were coated in rusty powder. Its throat was ripped open, a dark puddle collected under its neck, shimmering with the flies' movement. One of its hind legs was almost torn off, barely attached to its body by sinewy cords.

Luru walked away. He could taste the slaughter house's stench in his mouth and retched behind a bush, fighting to stamp out images of torn muscles and dislocated limbs. Nguyễn stared at the hog's mangled carcass, fighting a revulsion that choked him. This was not what he had expected from a hunt. He could not contemplate taking home any part of the animals, not even the tiger's coveted fangs and claws, nor the hog's prized tusks. He already knew he could not ever hunt again.

The friends collected their packs in silence. Nguyễn removed the spear from the tiger's neck, scattering a ring of flies that quickly reassembled over the seeping wound. His eyes brushed the dusty and blood-smearred body, perplexed by its seemingly already old and withered form. Luru was already on his way, the cord of the silk bag dangling from the top of his backpack, his hands laden with their weapons.

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Nguyễn followed Luru as they walked in single file up the narrow path through the old forest. Their footfalls sounded muffled in the eerie silence and the warm air was stale and thick with the smell of decayed woods. Around them, gnarled trees were blackened with age; their bare, rotten limbs hung precariously from skeletal frames. The friends trudged on for some time. It could have been hours or just a short period, but they had lost their sense of time. The only indication of their progress was the gradually softening sunlight that had faded into pinkish grey. The trees' grotesque shadows thickened and merged into a dark blanket on the ground. Now and again the silence was broken by one of the young men stumbling or tripping over a protruding root.

Approaching a small clearing, they dropped their bags and took a break on the ground.

‘How far have we gone, do you think?’ Nguyễn reached into his pack for a drink.

‘Probably more than half way?’ Luru ventured. ‘Two-thirds? It’s hard to tell.’

‘The woods seem ... different ...’ Nguyễn kept the rest of his thought to himself.

‘It’s so *old* around here,’ Luru agreed. ‘I don’t remember this part.’

Luru took a few gulps from his water gourd and looked around. His eyes stopped at a nearby tree, where a large, blackened branch had broken away from the trunk, barely held up by its brittle bark. Crushed under its own weight, the tip of the branch had splintered; its broken pieces were scattered nearby, old and decayed as if they had been there for years. Luru shuddered at the thought of walking under those rotten branches in the dark the night before.

‘Couldn’t see much last night anyway,’ he muttered.

They drank most of their water but did not want any snack, both were looking forward to night rice soon with their family. Nguyễn noticed Luru was gazing at the silk pouch at the top of his bag and recalled Luru’s face when he had called out to Nga at the Cloud Castle. Images of the Flower Valley’s scenery; stills of Lady Minh’s and the girls’ various expressions; snippets of their conversations returned to him as if from a distant past. A branch snapped somewhere nearby and Nguyễn jumped to his feet, reflexively reaching for the amulet on the thong around his neck as images of the boar-and-tiger fight returned. He suddenly felt weary and uneasy, impatient to get out of the forest. He collected his gear and motioned to Luru.

Luru led Nguyễn out of the clearing. ‘When we left last night,’ Luru shook his head, ‘who would’ve thought we’d end up in the Valley —’

‘We shouldn’t ... talk about it.’ Nguyễn cleared his throat. ‘At least not the ... um ... unusual stuff. I mean, how can we even ... *describe* all those things?’

‘Hmm,’ Luru considered soberly. ‘Yeah, we will only tell what they need to know. The gifts from the Castle and how magnificent the ... women are, the Valley too,’ he added quickly.

‘How they *live*, their abilities —’ His voice trailed off as he sifted through his memory. ‘I’ll tell my parents about Nga.’

Nguyễn agreed. He would leave it up to Luru to talk about their trip. His friend had always been better at explaining things, *especially* complicated things; and much of what they had seen that day at the Realm was more than complicated, largely *indescribable* and much still incomprehensible. He waited for Luru to continue, but he seemed preoccupied.

‘How do you think they’ll take it?’ Luru asked suddenly after some time.

‘Who take ... what?’

‘My being with ... Nga.’

‘Who? Your parents or hers?’

‘Mine. I haven’t ... thought about hers yet. We don’t even know what they’re like.’

‘I guess they would be happy. Haven’t they been waiting for you to settle down, the sooner the better?’

‘But Nga is from *another* land. She’s been raised and accustomed to different ... ways.’ Luru tightened his hands around his gear. ‘Mother is more flexible with ... you know, rules and traditions, but father ... I’m not sure —’

‘What do you think his main concern would be?’

‘I don’t know,’ Luru swallowed. ‘Sometimes father is unpredictable and ... difficult. I just don’t know what to expect.’

Nguyễn could see in his mind’s eye Luru’s father’s sharp features: his high forehead, thick brows and deep-set eyes with high cheekbones on a narrow face; his tall, thin frame with long and agile limbs; his deft hands and meticulous administration of every task; his deep and measured voice that made it difficult to gauge his emotions. Nguyễn shared Luru’s reverence for his father, understanding also his friend’s wish, since childhood, that he could physically and mentally embrace his father as easily as he could his mother. But it had seemed Luru’s father had kept to himself behind an invisible barrier, largely unreachable. The villagers respected and valued Luru’s austere father, but few understood or were close to him, including Nguyễn, who frequented his home and had been almost like a son to Luru’s parents. The old physician’s dedication to his work and family were perhaps the only things villagers knew about him. His reclusive life and some of his baffling decisions – he had never seen the need to explain, having absolute authority in the family – had set him apart from the farmers and ordinary families. He had continued maintaining a hard-to-reach home on a steep hill in the far south, for instance, despite the fact that it had become increasingly difficult for the old physician and his patients to commute on a daily basis between his home and the village. He revered and upheld traditions,

possibly a consequence of the need for strict adhering to medical teachings and procedures. It was unlikely for him to bend rules unless under extraordinary circumstances.

‘Your mother can persuade him *sometimes*, can’t she?’

‘I’m not sure how he would take that. You know how father has always been adamant that there are plenty of suitable brides for me within our social circle: daughters of this gentleman or nieces of that lady. You’ve seen how many matchmaking attempts my parents have made over the years. I’ve tried to humour them. It has been agreed I’ll soon need a faithful and dependable assistant, as mother has been to father, but I’m not going to marry just a medical assistant —’

‘Of course not, even less likely now,’ Nguyễn laughed. ‘If anything, I bet you’ll disappear from social functions from now on.’

Luru groaned. ‘You know, a frequent topic of late has been desirable traits for my prospective bride —’

‘Even better! Now *you* are making the proposal. Your parents should be happy you’re finally paying attention to someone, actually *wanting* to be with a girl —’

‘I don’t know. Her family is so far away and ... unknown. But I guess ... *hope* that father will at least hear me out. Mother may ... possibly —’ Luru sighed.

‘Hey,’ Nguyễn slapped his back. ‘You’re not home yet but already thinking about coming back. You’ve got a serious case of incurable love-sickness, *healer*,’ he snorted. ‘How about you give your father an ultimatum: if I can’t marry Nga, I will disappear into her enchanted land *forever*. I bet your parents wouldn’t contemplate losing you.’

Luru stopped abruptly and faced his friend.

‘Wouldn’t it be *bất hiếu* to talk – even *think* – that way?’ I’m their only child —’

Nguyễn’s smile faded. ‘You can only do your best,’ he offered mildly. ‘Look, it’s the first time you’re in love with someone, it’s progress. Your parents should be thrilled about that, considering they’ve been so keen to see you settle down. Maybe they won’t mind her family being ... far away and ... things. Maybe your worries will amount to nothing.’

‘I hope so.’ Luru he started up the path. ‘And let’s hope that *her* family won’t object to her choosing me —’

‘What makes you think that?’

‘Well I ... can’t help seeing how different we are. I’m a clueless country boy to their living in a *castle*. I’m not sure if I can even talk to her people without ...’

‘What?’

‘I don’t know. Saying disagreeable things to them? Or asking questions that will alienate them further. I just feel clumsy and inadequate around them. Their *knowledge* and ways of living are ... intimidating. No, that’s not the right word for it, they are ... awe-inspiring, but to be with them is a mountain for me to scale —’

‘Are you saying you’re not compatible with Nga and her people?’

‘No, that’s not ... it. You know what I mean. You’ve *seen* her people. I was just wondering if I’m pining for something ... someone beyond my reach.’

Nguyễn considered his friend and could not disagree.

‘There’s also my situation —’ Luru sighed.

‘*Situation?*’

‘I’ll have to stay in the village to continue my duties —’

‘So?’

‘So if her parents will not let her go, then I’ll have *no* chance. I can’t go to her but she can’t leave either.’

Luru thrust his spear into the ground and distractedly drilled a hole with it. Nguyễn was in turmoil on his friend’s behalf. He had not thought that far ahead. He had no solution to offer.

‘Let’s speak to your parents first,’ Nguyễn suggested gently.

Luru started up the path but could not turn his mind away from one of the main concerns that he had yet to discuss with Nguyễn. He mulled over the possibility that his father would agree to fully train Thành, a trusted family friend, *not* to be Luru’s assistant but a physician in *his* place *if* he were to live abroad in the future. He could imagine his father’s look, the tone that would not hide his disappointment, and his unspoken pain. Luru had never thought any of his personal choices would interfere with this duty-bound vocation of carrying on the family’s long-held medical tradition. It has been the *only* path for him, an unequivocal honour, obligation and *purpose* of his life – or he had thought so until that day.

He intuitively recalled the ancient teachings and wisdom of holding on to one’s life purpose despite pains and losses, but this – curiously – somehow led to cautions against following one’s unreliable heart to avoid pain and losses. Confused by contradictory teachings he had learned in different situations, he came to the conclusion that, whatever his choice, he was bound to let someone down. For the first time in his life, Luru came to appreciate a famous rhetorical question about love, as the heroin Kiều had faced in the famous epic poem, *Tale of Kiều*. He had previously dismissed this as something that would not ever apply to him, but now it his precise dilemma: Bên tình bên hiếu, bên nào nặng hơn? Love on one side (of the scale), filial duty the other, which is heavier?

They reached a hillside. Luru noticed, through a narrow gap between tall trees and boulders, a glow in the valley below. This area was much larger and brighter than the faintly lit patch they had often recognised as the main area of their village from that distance. It wasn't the sunset. He could see its coppery tinge on the western horizon, while their village was on the east, now lost somewhere within the bright expanse spreading from the purple shadows of the mountain ranges to the river. He strained to see if there was smoke but was certain there wasn't any. Anxiety niggled in his mind. He could not come up with any plausible explanation for this strange view. He tried to block speculations and decided against telling Nguyễn just yet. *We'll see what it is soon enough*, he convinced himself.

'I wonder what they'll make of our hunt.' Nguyễn said behind him.

Luru slowed and took a deep breath. Images of the blood-smeared tiger spasming with a spear through its neck, its golden eyes clouded with dying breaths came to his mind. He felt again the crippling pull between his instinct to relieve the animal of its agony, evident in its stricken eyes, and the other, equally strong instinct to preserve life, thus prolonging its suffering. He gagged at the memory of the hog's carcass and the stench that had made him sick. He wished they had not embarked on this impulsive trip. The hunt wasn't a failure. If anything, it was an extraordinary experience. They had witnessed a jungle legend and survived, unharmed, to tell the tale. They could have made a small fortune – and achieved lasting fame if they had chosen to – by collecting prized body parts from the feared beasts. Yet what they had been through had changed them irrevocably.

'You mean our being hunted?' Luru said, surprising them both with unusual bitterness. 'I guess there'll be a "clean-up" pretty soon if they know about the fight and the carcasses.'

'Good spoils, you reckon? No-one's ever found a hog's carcass before. Now there's a tiger's as well. I wonder who they'll send for the *mission*.' Nguyễn added sarcastically.

'An *elite* party, only the finest to retrieve the tusks.'

'You mean ... butchers to cut up the dead animals? It'll be hard work choosing from the volunteers.'

'Will another meeting be called to choose the team? I won't be surprised if Bách leads them again, but the scene might have been "tidied up" before the official party is dispatched.'

'We don't need to mention it, do we?'

'I suppose not.' Luru shrugged. 'It's a fair distance from local hunting and gathering areas, good luck to anyone who chances upon them. There may not be much, if anything, left after a few days. The hogs eat anything and everything they find.'

‘It’s a pity we can’t talk about it,’ Nguyễn sighed. ‘It was such a ... gruesome battle. People would *die* to hear about it. We never expected to see anything like that —’

‘We can later, I suppose. Other men who missed out on selection might have decided to go on their own, too. Maybe someone will find the carcasses.’

When Luru slowed down to adjust his pack, Nguyễn pushed ahead and felled a low-hanging branch. He led the way at a brisk pace, weary of the rough path through the darkening forest, looking forward to leaving it soon. Luru lagged behind and paused at a bend.

‘What is it?’ Nguyễn asked impatiently.

‘I don’t know. Something’s happening down there. The whole area is so bright ...’

Nguyễn hurried back to Luru. ‘What? When did you notice this?’

‘Just ... a little while back, but it’s clearer here.’ Luru pointed from the lookout.

‘Why didn’t you tell me? Is it a fire?’

‘No, it doesn’t look like it. There’s no smoke.’

‘What do you think it is? Is there something happening tonight?’

‘Lễ Vu Lan. But it’s an indoor event. Even with lots of people on the street with lanterns and torches, it couldn’t be *that* bright.’

They took a sharp turn and Luru stopped abruptly, narrowly avoiding tripping over a fallen tree blocking the path. He scrambled over the trunk, pulling himself free from a tangle of branches. Nguyễn followed closely, cursing under his breath, wanting to ask Luru to light a torch, as he could barely see his own hands. He nearly lost his balance, twigs grasping him like bony fingers, but he finally broke free and raced after Luru.

Across a clearing leading to a wider path, they entered a familiar part of the woods, where the locals often stopped for breaks. There was not far to go to the entrance into the village, yet their view to the valley was blocked by a wall of giant conifers jostling for space with silky oaks, jambolans and golden cypresses along a high ridge. Their shadows merged with canopies of mahoganies and broad saman trees, blocking out the dwindling daylight.

Luru spotted a stump, leaned his pack on it and lit a torch. The friends sped side-by-side along the rough path lined by grotesque shadows that swooped down and danced around them to the rhythm of the moving torch. A heavy silence hung between them. Each was held captive by his own thoughts since their conversation’s abrupt end, but neither wanted to continue it. An ugly and nameless fear clung to Luru like wet clothes.

Home. He fought the uncontainable fear with images of home: a warmly lit kitchen lined with food jars; a steaming pot of thịt kho, honey-and-soy glazed pork; canh rau với tép, mixed-leaves soup with shrimps; đồ xào, stir-fry beans tossed with spring onions, and freshly cooked

rice, among little bowls of pickles and sauces. He imagined sitting at the dining table; seeing the smooth ironwood columns in the family room; listening to his parents' conversation during their meal; smelling the fresh evening breeze coming through the kitchen window, mingling with the smells of hot food that would make his stomach rumble in anticipation. His mother had promised to make his favourite dishes for tonight. He wondered which ones this time.

His foot sank into something squishy. Thrown from his food-dream, Luu looked down and was sickened to see he had stepped on a decaying squirrel. He staggered, revolted by the stench and fled in shock. Unable to recognise where he was, he ran faster, suddenly finding himself in his feared childhood nightmare. Skeletal arms reached down to him from gnarled trees, the path ahead was lost in a pool of blackness. His legs were heavy as if dragging through deep mud. His body shook as he gasped for air.

A strong hand grasped his wrist and held him in place.

'Luu!' Nguyễn's voice shook him out of the stupor.

He blinked as the pool of light around him wavered to a stop. He was running. But it wasn't a dream. 'Where are we?'

He looked into the distance beyond the reach of the torchlight and took in the strange glow, spreading from the end of the mountains' shadows to the distant east and far south. Countless bright spots of light from pure white to bright yellow, orange and red, dotted the area. These were not fire colours, and there was no smoke. A vague recognition began to gather like a mist in his mind. Catching first the dark outline of the Dragon Head peak on the Hàm Rồng Mountain in the distance, he quickly identified the elongated patch that matched his memory of their local lake. Then his heart turned into ice. He was looking at an unrecognisable chain of valleys that only yesterday was his homeland.

Chapter 9: Ghosts and Giants

Luru and Nguyễn searched hard for familiar signposts. They scanned the central valley for markers and vestiges of the landscape they had known by heart but, except for the distinct bulk of the ancient banyan tree on the widened north-south artery, there was nothing else recognisable. Luru stared numbly at the central hill, where the Grand Hall had stood in open ground, bathing in gold moonlight, when they had departed last night. It had vanished. In its place was a menacing structure with a huge arched mouth headed by an arrow-shaped tower attached to a long body. Dispersing like poisonous breaths from the gills of a monstrous creature, a yellow haze filtered out of a double column of slits on the tower's narrow face, faintly illuminating a black cross on top of the tower and throwing ghastly shadows over the cavernous dark mouth below. The same jaundiced cloud seeped from unseen openings on its sides, casting a sickly yellow over its body and hanging over its surroundings. The glow was static, unlike fire, with no apparent sources.

Desperate to walk away, to block out the hideous scene below, Luru could not resist looking for the gentle hill further south from the Hall, where the village school had been. In his mind's eye, he saw again the u-shaped brown building with its winged roof nestled under the shade of the ancient bodhi tree; recalled the timber walls softly echoing children's voices and teachers' readings; the tall stone plaques lining the front garden bearing scholars' names; and the large bronze urn in the circular courtyard that filled the school ground with sandalwood incense during celebrations and ceremonies. The school had been the lungs of the village as the Hall was its heart. Apart from his and Nguyễn's homes, it had been the one public place in which he had spent most of his younger years. Locating the site, Luru was dismayed when he found no match to his memory. Focussing on what was now the bald school hill, he was shaken by the sight of a long structure formed by dozens of sections joined together; each bore a uniform bump as its roof, giving the building the appearance of a giant pale worm draping itself across the hilltop. Dark holes interspersed with glowing eyelets dotted its long body, some single, others in clusters of squares. They were mocking him with their unblinking stares.

Luru felt fear clawing at his chest. He turned to Nguyễn, wanting to ask if his friend was seeing the same things in the valley. Luru desperately hoped that he had fallen into yet another nightmare and wanted Nguyễn to shake him out of it, but he could not put together any coherent sentence. He wanted to believe, and for some moments, he did, that he had somehow lost his mind, being unable to find any plausible explanation for what he had seen, or *how* those

nameless things could have sprouted up in their village like poisonous mushrooms overnight. His hope vanished with one look at his friend. Luru felt the ground tilt under his feet, but Nguyễn caught his arm. The pain brought back his senses. Nguyễn's expression reminded Luru of the day Nguyễn had rescued him from a pit, broken and voiceless. Now Nguyễn had pulled him away from the edge of a stone ledge. Luru had not seen how perilously close he was to falling off the cliff in his effort to read the alien landscape below.

'Let's go!' Nguyễn's voice was rough and hollow.

Following Nguyễn trudging up the slope, Luru felt as if he was made of lead. He tripped on loose scree, stumbled a few times and was baffled by his sudden clumsiness. Soon the view to the valleys was obscured again by a screen of evergreens. Luru's confusion grew as he could recognise little of this area, just a few distinct turns in the path and some boulders. Now large stretches of woods were shorn away, widening the track to double or triple the width he remembered. Here and there, handrails appeared alongside unfamiliar sets of steps. Luru heard voices, indistinct chatter, and looked around but didn't see anyone. Perplexed, he continued on as the voices dissipated only to return a short time later, close enough for him to hear snippets of conversations. Men were worrying about a poor harvest, about not having enough to feed their families and cover the tax season ahead. He had not before heard the names that were mentioned, did not know what kind of tax was being talked about. He stopped and peered around. Shadows were moving among trees. The torchlight moved further ahead, leaving him now in semi-darkness. Several voices were speaking now. Although Luru could not grasp some strange words, it was clear from the men's distress that an unsolvable crisis has been affecting them all.

'Who's there?' Luru asked aloud, walking back down the track.

Where are they? He searched among the trees, looking for local men whom he guessed were taking a break after work on their way back to the village. An eerie silence met him as he stepped out of the feeble light. No one was there. He listened but could hear only his own erratic breathing and Nguyễn's footsteps moving away further ahead. Then he was swallowed in complete blackness. He wanted to call out but no sounds came from his mouth. He took a few steps back and stumbled onto a tree trunk; its thick, pungent sap held his hand firmly to the coarse bark. He looked around, bewildered. Nguyễn had disappeared around a corner. He tried to pull his hand free but fear stiffened his limbs.

A bird's call shattered the still night. Startled, Luru looked up as the sound of wings passed overhead. He watched the gliding form against thinning foliage, following it into an empty patch of sky with pinpricks of early evening stars. It chilled him to remember, when they had passed here last night, how thick the canopy over this narrow path had been, impenetrable by

moonlight. He sank to his knees. Fear from the inexplicable orange glow in the valley took hold of him; its brightness intensified into a sea of fire swallowing up the entire region below. Terrified, Luru found himself again in a childhood memory, when two little boys huddled behind a bush across from the dispensary, watching it being engulfed in flames, while some people were still trapped inside. He and Nguyễn had clutched at one another and tried to cover their ears and mouths, but they could not block out the screams and the smoke that choked them and stung their eyes.

There were hands on his shoulders, shaking him. Nguyễn's voice, grave and urgent but no longer a child's, cut through the noise.

'Luru. *Luru!* What are you doing?'

'Fire ...' he rasped.

'What fire? Where?'

'Valley ... *dispensary* —'

Blinking in the sudden light, he saw frustration and pity in Nguyễn's eyes. Understanding and fear, too, before Nguyễn let go of him.

Numbly, he watched Nguyễn gather his scattered belongings. He tried pulling himself up but his hand was still stuck on the tree trunk. Nguyễn cut him free. Luru's legs were stiff, heavy and weak all at once, but he forced himself to take his up pack and follow Nguyễn down the mountain.

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They reached the end of the foothill and came to a stop at the entrance to the village. The hanging bridge had ... gone. In its place was a red metal structure wider than two ox carts' width, framed by a tall rectangular gateway on either end. Thick metal rails in dusky red ran the length of the structure, almost twice as long as the old bridge, with tall wires hanging at regular intervals connecting the top bars to the rails. Luru swallowed but his throat remained rock-dry. He remembered crossing the hip-width hanging bridge in single file under a bright moon last night. When his foot had stuck in a gap between the wooden slats, Nguyễn's laughing had set the flimsy thing swaying over the fast moving water. Luru had clung to the handrail ropes while tugging his foot free, noticing the clear creek lined with large, smooth stones, before hurrying to catch up with his sure-footed friend, who had already reached the other bank. The dark water was now crinkled with rubble and debris; its sluggish flow dragged around barriers. He looked at Nguyễn. *How could this have happened overnight?* This question has been tormenting him since Nguyễn had shaken him out of his stupor at the lookout. His friend had already moved on. In a

daze, he followed, crossing the embankment and mounting the entrance to the monstrous replacement to their hanging bridge.

Thuds of their footsteps on metal startled the emptiness in the deepening dusk. The clanging intensified Luru's unease, reminding him of emergency gongs. The torch flickered in Nguyễn's hand as the flame died. They were plunged into darkness with half the bridge's length to go, but some stars and scattered light from dwellings along the bank threw faint light ahead, giving them a target to make their way toward. Despite ample space on the bridge, they both felt caged in by hanging wires cutting the sky into strips.

A breeze carried sounds of talking and laughter from the village. Luru wondered what the occasion was for the people gathering outdoors. Beyond the immediate row of houses along the bank, the streets were flooded with light. *Was it an engagement or a wedding reception?* He did not recall hearing of any impending nuptial in the village, where *any* news – especially momentous events such as a marriage, birth or death – would have spread within hours. In any case, an engagement or a wedding would take many moons to prepare. His heart leapt at the thought of Nga, and he wondered what kind of ceremonies her people would expect him to fulfill *if* he could pass all circumstantial and personal hurdles to be with her. He wondered would there be different rules for foreigners, different tests for suitors from other cultures.

Crossing the bare ground, still in the dark, Nguyễn held up his hand and stopped suddenly. A short distance ahead, two men were walking toward them. They stopped outside the last house on the no-through road, while continuing their conversation. Luru did not recognise them, nor had he seen anyone as tall as these two men, whose heads almost reached the top of the doorframe. One of the men turned aside and swatted an insect on his neck. Luru felt a chill run through his body when he caught sight of the man's face in the light: his deep-set eyes with shadows like two dark holes bore into a ghostly-white face. The sharp, narrow nose and thin pale strips for a mouth completed his facial features, unlike any he had come across before.

Who are they? What are they doing here? Luru's mind reeled with questions. When they last crossed this area, there were no houses or streets in this far corner of the village, only rolling grass banks. Another breeze swept past, carrying, among unfamiliar noises, a woman's shrieks. Pain or laughter?

'Let's take the back roads,' Nguyễn whispered.

Luru agreed. They were burning to get home and it might take them longer, but they could avoid being delayed or meeting strangers on the back streets. They weaved through side paths among the shadows and emerged from an empty lane into an area backing onto the river. Brightly lit houses with pale, smooth walls like plaster models lined leafy streets. This had once

been an open meadow with an unobstructed view to the central hill. Luru spotted a bright light on the front veranda of a house nearby and drew nearer to investigate. He was baffled by the bald, compact 'torch' that produced no smoke and was attached upside down from the ceiling, radiating a steady yellow light like other houses in the area. These flameless torches protruded from walls and hung on trees, radiating light in a range of colours from white to shades of yellow, orange and red, producing a blanket glow over the region, such as Luru had seen from the mountain.

The friends stopped to regain their bearings at an unfamiliar intersection when Luru saw something moving into his peripheral vision. A moving ... trunk? No. *Two* closed carts came into view from the other side of the road. Light reflected off their shiny bodies as the self-propelled carts rolled smoothly past. Confounded, the friends tried to see what was in the boxes-on-wheels, and how they were pulled along without horses or cattle, but only glimpsed some pale faces within the dark interiors. Keeping to the shadows, they sped along the road to keep pace with the carts, which slowed to a stop outside a large dwelling. The side panels cracked open. Legs in white trousers emerged, followed by bent bodies that unfolded into white giants. Luru's mouth dried with dread as he recognised features similar to the man by the river: deep-set eyes, milk-white skin and sharp noses, one curved like a beak on a bony face. The newcomers talked to one another on alighting from their carts, their voices ringing clear in the empty street; incomprehensible words stabbed Luru and stoked his raging fear at the impossible changes that had taken place in the village in their absence.

The white men entered the gate and were greeted by two young local women dressed in silk áo-dài. Their warm tones reached Nguyễn and Luru from across the road, but their words were unintelligible. When the women spoke again to the newcomers, Luru was struck by their conversing in the foreigners' tongue. *How long have they been here?* Sickened with anxiety, Luru wanted to run home but remained stuck in his spot. The giant visitors were led to a table near a window. Soon serving women arrived at their table with drinks and returned with bowls and dishes. Strange music spilled into the streets, a mixture of foreign words accompanied by unfamiliar instruments that sometimes overtook the dreary singer with their metallic squeals and discordant hammering.

The friends hurried away as more carts arrived along the street and people filtered into different eating places. They passed a garishly decorated place lit with red lights from which a hubbub of noises and music blared. There was a commotion at the door, a woman shrieked and a handful of people staggered out from the smoky hallway. The friends' attention fixed on a small figure among the company of four giant men and one woman. Linking arms with a man, the little

woman stumbled on the landing and let out a screech that dissolved into a babble of laughter. The high pitched voice continued with a jumble of foreign sounds and expletives that set off guffaws and slurred remarks among her companions. Confounded and embarrassed by the scene, the friends watched in consternation as the group shuffled away, noting the local woman's painted face, her long colourful tunic worn with no pants and her pointy-heeled shoes as she tottered on the arm of an unsteady man. What madness had befallen the locals – and themselves – in the span of one day?

A cart stopped a short distance away on the opposite side of the road. A local couple alighted and spoke in foreign tongue as they waited on the footpath. There was something about the young woman that caught the friends' attention. When a foreign couple joined them from the far side of the cart, the young woman greeted her companions, turning to them in the streetlight. Nguyễn's heart leapt at recognising the face of his fiancée, Hiền. He could not make out her words, but the voice was just like hers, as were the dimpled smile, full lips, inky black brows and slanted eyes that sharpened Hiền's otherwise soft features on her round face. The man put his arm around her. The two couples headed into an eating house nearby, with tables set out in the garden under the soft glow of little orange lights.

'It's not *her*,' Luru whispered, reaching out to Nguyễn.

'*How* —' Nguyễn choked.

'I don't know. But that's not how she looked or ... behaved.' Luru felt his friend's anguish.

Nguyễn was certain he couldn't have mistaken her. But the fact that she was with another man, who was closer to her than he was ever allowed to be, burned him. Although they were already engaged, he was not allowed to hold hands, let alone put his arm around her in public. It had always been common propriety that even long married couples should not show their affection in others' presence. He was devastated by the extent of intimacy he had just witnessed. He thought of what Luru had just said: the young woman's gait, an evidently painted face, and a close-fitting outfit revealing her curvaceous body, none of these had been his fiancée's attributes. *The strange language.* Hiền didn't speak that. Luru tugged him forward. Nguyễn cast a desperate last look at the garden but could not locate the four diners. He turned away, numbly following Luru's feet into a long, shadowy street.

The friends wove their way through a maze of new streets crammed with houses with painted walls, some two- and three-storeys tall. Heading south, they were baffled by continuously blocked views in densely built areas, where once rolling hills and open fields had stretched almost to the turn off to Nguyễn's home. They were lost and confused at times, finding

themselves coming back to the same places, with no familiar landmarks to guide them in the dark. Their village had become a foreign place. Bewildered and tired, they took a break at an intersection that appeared vaguely similar but were unable to tell where each of the three branches led to.

Looking up at the sullen sky, Luru's heart sank when he could not see a single star, his last hope to regain their bearings. Bone-weary and heavy-hearted, he was pained by having disappointed his parents for failing to return on time to share the special night rice his mother had prepared. He knew they must have been anxiously waiting for him for some time, but did not know how long it would take to get home, *if* they could find their way out of this labyrinth in the night, with tall dwellings barring distant views on all sides, leaving only faint glimmers of light between gaps. Any path they choose would be a stab in the dark. Nguyễn started moving again, taking a right turn. Luru followed, concurred with the choice, noticed that they were leaving behind the brightest lights of the central zone.

They came to the end of one street and trudged onto another. Their silence stretched on. Wandering the streets in the dark, Luru was despondent by what, and who, he had lost. He no longer knew the names of the streets or the people occupying new dwellings in what once been his village. He ached for the vanished hills and boulders; grieved for the sprawling old trees whose welcoming shade he had striven to reach on his long walks home. Countless places that had been keepers of treasured memories, monuments to history of his family and villagers, all gone now.

Absorbed in his thoughts and memories, Luru gradually heard and saw less of what was around him, as his feet took him to a place he once knew. It was a dirt road that narrowed and became dustier away from the farmhouses, then curved left and continued among rampant foliage until it opened into an oblong field. He had always stopped there at the entrance, overwhelmed at the sight of rows upon rows of grave markers in different sizes, leaning at different angles. He had imagined the people lying beneath the markers. He had walked along different aisles, reading the names and ages of those who had gone, wondered what their dreams and hopes had been, and if they had fulfilled them; wondered what had taken them away, if they had died before their time.

His parents had taken him there since he was little. Seven times every year, one for each of his older siblings on the day they had died, after his or her *Đám giỗ*, Death Anniversary ceremony at home. He remembered by heart where each of his siblings was buried, not together, unlike clusters of families whose loved ones had reserved plots for their elders and extended family members. He had wondered and was sad about this, until his parents had explained that

they did not know his brothers and sisters would die young, or how many children they would have, to reserve plots for them to be together. He had understood then, but was concerned about where his parents would choose for their final resting place; knowing that when their time came, the area around his siblings' graves would have been filled. It does not matter, his parents had told him, as long as we are together on the altar at home, and somewhere among our children in this field, we will be happy enough. His parents were yet to reserve their plots, despite seeing each year that the vacant spaces were further away from their children. Somehow he had understood, even at a young age, his parents' sadness that they would not be buried near their own parents and siblings, or their children. He understood their unexpressed wish that *he* would be buried beside them, when his time came. Perhaps this had been the reason for his parents' reluctance to reserve their plots – they were unable and unwilling to reserve ground for him. Perhaps his parents had feared this would bring bad luck to him or, on a more sentimental but practical level, that this would mean he would be buried apart from his wife and children in long years to come. Whatever the reason was, he had not discussed it with them.

Now, Luru was surprised to find himself at the burial field, unsure of the reason for this visit. He only knew he urgently needed to find all of his siblings' graves. He tried to walk quickly but his legs could only carry him slowly, and he could not see much in the darkened field to locate his siblings' grave markers. He stooped to check some markers, and to his despair, they were blank. The stone plaques – old and new, upright or fallen – were all blank, as if painted over or the writing scraped from their surfaces. Distraught and disoriented among thousands of graves, he knew he must return to the entrance to find his way forward again, guided only by his memory of the counting patterns he had used to locate his siblings' graves. He took a few steps before realising why he was there: to find his parents' resting places. He must exhume and rebury all his siblings near his parents. Overcome with despair, he broke down by the side of an old grave, disconsolate by his failure to bring his family members together to fulfill his parents' unexpressed wish.

Luru heard footsteps approaching, then Nguyễn's hushed voice, clear and close by his ear. He had found the way home, Nguyễn said, and let's hurry up, he added. Luru rubbed his eyes, finding his face was damp. He wanted to ask Nguyễn how long he had sat there, but he could not speak. Luru struggled to comprehend the time he had spent in the graveyard: it had not been a memory but it was an unimaginable experience also. It seemed that his faculties were disabled. He could not distinguish between the houses lining the streets they had passed and rows of unmarked graves in the burial yard. He resolved to focus instead on Nguyễn's stoic figure ahead.

Then he saw it: the dark mass of the bamboo thicket standing out against the mushroom-coloured sky, the unmissable landmark just before the turn off to his friend's home. Nguyễn had broken into a run. Luru raced after him, his heart hammering at the sight of the familiar tall hedge just as Nguyễn disappeared into shadows beyond the gate. Elated at seeing the great house still intact in the rampant garden, Luru ran up the path. He caught Nguyễn scaling the steps and launching himself across the veranda.

The door was locked. Nguyễn called out and waited impatiently before pounding on the heavy doors. He was surprised that his family had locked them. The friends waited together on the empty veranda. Nguyễn's calls disappeared again into the dark and silent house.

Chapter 10: The Lost Hunters

Nguyễn flung his pack and weapons in a corner. Luru emulated him, heaving a sigh on shedding his load, yet something heavy remained in his chest.

‘What now?’

Nguyễn’s irritation mirrored Luru’s anxiety. The uneasiness with which he had been watching Nguyễn calling and waiting had been mounting. Luru suggested they could call at the neighbours, if all else failed, but checking around the house first to see if they could gain entry from the back might be quicker, although this would entail scaling the side gate. As Nguyễn headed to the steps, faint shuffling sounds came from within. They rushed back to the door as a metal bolt screeched in protest at being dragged across a rusty rail. Nguyễn froze at the sound. This was new in his home.

The door cracked open and a lantern appeared in the gap. Nguyễn blinked in surprise and adjusted to the sudden bright light. He caught the sight of a brown, weathered arm above the lantern and the silhouette of a figure still in the shadow, both unfamiliar to him. A middle-aged man poked his head out between the gap.

‘Who are you looking for?’

It was less a question than a cautious statement. *I don’t know you. What’s your business here?* The very same thoughts came to Nguyễn’s mind, seeing a complete stranger at his door. But his irritation gave way to something utterly confounding: *he* was the caller, being questioned on the threshold of *his* home by an unknown person, who was apparently occupying his place. The man looked from Nguyễn to Luru and back. His eyes narrowed as he lifted the lantern for a closer look at Nguyễn. An unreadable expression flickered across his face. His forehead furrowed as he took in the dark, square face. His eyes widened, noticing the height and build of the towering young man.

Silence stretched between the two men. When their eyes met, a glint of something like recognition in the man’s eyes surprised Nguyễn and stirred his memory of someone bearing similar features.

‘I’m looking for Brother Long,’ Nguyễn said.

‘There’s no-one called Long here,’ the man replied.

Nguyễn took a deep breath, holding it in his chest. His mind stumbled through each word before putting them together again. *No... one. No-one. Called. Long?* It made no sense. A flood of questions jumbled his thoughts. He couldn’t speak. *Where’s my family?* This must be a

mistake. He looked around. *His* house looked the same, but this man was not supposed to be here, nor had he any right to block the door. Yet a seed of fear seemed to grow quickly into dark shadows enveloping his mind.

‘Brother Long and his wife, Suong, their family were ... here.’ His voice fell into a whisper.

The man’s face hardened.

‘How did you know about them?’ His voice was cold and suspicious.

‘Where did they go?’ Nguyễn leaned forward. ‘Why are you here?’

‘Who are you?’ The man croaked and took a step back.

‘I am ... no matter. I want to know WHAT happened with *them*?’ Nguyễn lurched forward. He wanted to hold the man from going back into the house but stopped himself.

‘They were ... my great-grandparents. Both passed away before I was born.’ The man spoke quickly, watching Nguyễn.

‘*Great grandparents?*’ Nguyễn repeated hoarsely.

The man was perplexed by the visitor’s reaction, examined the young man’s dark face that had turned mud-grey. It was as if he had trúng gió, caught a noxious wind. Baffled, the man glanced at the other visitor, who also appeared ill. Unnerved, the man hastened to send them away.

‘Is there anything else ...?’

Luru prickled at the man’s expression. The condescending pity and his disgust reminded Luru of the kind of look people involuntarily showed when passing a road kill. The man was determined to get rid of them fast.

‘Why did you ask about my great-grandparents?’ He demanded. *What’s your business here?*

Nguyễn flinched. Luru stepped in.

‘What did you know about your ... great-grandfather’s youngest brother, Nguyễn?’ Luru asked.

The man recoiled. Fear cut ugly lines on his face. He took another step back, hiding behind the doorframe as Luru leaned closer.

‘Why?’ the man rasped.

‘Please ...’ Luru implored, ‘we *must* know.’

The lantern shook in the man’s hand. ‘Go away,’ he barked, backing into the house and yanking the door, trying to shut it.

Luru grabbed his wrist. ‘Just this once. Please. We won’t bother you again.’

The man was trembling; his eyes flashed with fright and anger. *I'm so sorry*, Luru wanted to say, but his patience broke.

‘Speak,’ Luru snapped.

The man nodded. His lips quivered. ‘*He ... the one you asked about ... went hog hunting with a friend. They ... never came back.*’

The man tried to free himself, but Luru’s grip remained firmly around his wrist. *More.* The man’s pulse raced beneath Luru’s thumb.

‘Search parties scoured the woods but found nothing.’ The man spoke quickly. ‘No bodies, no bags or clothes, *nothing* left of them. But,’ he dropped his voice, looking around nervously, ‘they found *footprints*. Two pairs headed to the wetland. *Vanished* in the swamp!’

Luru could see again the soft ground surrounding the pond where they had stopped in the morning, remembered noticing their deep footprints in the moist earth. He could almost hear the sound of the waterfall ...

‘*Taken!*’ The man’s snarl snapped Luru out of his recollection.

‘Wh ... why?’ He couldn’t understand what the man meant.

‘It was said that evil spirits had lured them away and the hogs had taken them *whole* in revenge for their slain kin.’

Luru wanted to laugh at the preposterous suggestion. Then he remembered the very reason his friend was rejected for the hunting team: an ingrained fear born from superstition. Bách had cunningly tied the local Legend to Nguyễn’s family history, using fear as an effective weapon to eliminate a potential rival. No doubt Bách must have ramped up his scaremongering in their absence. Luru’s blood boiled on realising their disappearance had been projected through such a macabre interpretation that would have devastated their families and friends beyond the grief of losing loved ones. The fear that not only their circle of close people had suffered, but that villagers also must have shared, would have frightened them into further submission to superstitious mongering. *That* would have raised Bách’s popularity and added weight to his earlier claims about the ‘curse’ on Nguyễn’s family. This might have earned him a place among the Elders as he had so desired. The fear had evidently lived on, passed down through generations since then.

‘How long since your ... great-uncle disappeared?’

‘A hundred years.’ Guilt pulled at the man’s face. ‘No-one knew exactly when he died so no Death Anniversary ceremony could be held for him, but we made him a remembrance offering on the day he had left —’

*

A hundred years. Nguyễn's felt the ground tilt under his feet. *All dead.* His eyes stung and blurred.

Hiền. Her face swam before him. He tried to refocus but her features were veiled by a thickening mist. He reached out to squeeze her small hands in his and called her name, but no sounds came. Then he saw his empty hands closed into fists. It had been less than three moons to their wedding. She had begged him to reconsider the hunting trip. 'No,' he had said.

Chị Suong. There were happy lines around her mouth and worry wrinkles feathering her eyes. 'This will keep you safe,' she had said, pressing the protection amulet into his hand. He had remembered looking up to her serene face, standing beside her at Long and Suong's wedding. She had gradually become the mother figure in his life. He was devastated, seeing her ceremonial áo dài swaying in the coat hanger.

Anh Long. His calm look and few words. Faces of his six sisters. Voices and manners of cousins, aunts and uncles. Laughter and affection of nephews and nieces. Gestures of friends and neighbours. All came flooding back vividly as if he had seen them in the last few days. Then the visions faded. *All gone.* All the people he had known and loved had been buried.

*

A hundred years. The words flitted around in Lư's mind, evading his grasp until they came together again. The meaning shocked him like a lit torch illuminating an unseen place, revealing unfathomable spaces that he must now navigate.

One day. He could still smell the cinnamon on his mother's hand from the sweets she had made in the afternoon, when she gave him the jade Bodhisattva statue. He could still see his father's smiling eyes by the fat yellow moon through the window; could still taste the peppery ginger slices chị Suong had offered him in her kitchen. 'Don't be late for tomorrow's night rice,' his mother had said. 'I won't.' He had promised both of his parents not to return late or stay long near stagnant water.

Mother. He was lost in a sea of people on the steps of the temple, having wriggled his hand free from her grasp to scratch an itch. The crowd surged forward and his mother had disappeared among the people leaving the temple. The quaking three-year-old boy could not breathe in the hot and airless space blocked on all sides by torsos and legs of the passing crowd. He had relived this traumatic memory countless times in his childhood nightmares, woken up choking with tears. But his mother's voice and hugs had always soothed him back to sleep.

A hundred years. His body was quaking just like his three-year-old self among the flood of strangers. He could not still it. Stark comprehension sank in that he would never again hear his mother's voice or feel her embrace. His parents' presence alone had made insurmountable tasks

possible. He ached for his mother's voice to calm his nerves as her hands tended to his wounds. He thirsted for his father's empowering sensibility, as assuring as his treatment of injuries. Fresh pains like a rain of arrows punctured him. He could not bear thinking about the loss and grief his parents had endured in their old age, following his disappearance; of their buying a plot for him at the cemetery only to fill an empty grave with his clothes and personal items he had left behind. The memory of his inexplicable visit to the graveyard earlier in the evening shook him to the core. He still did not know how he had got there, but Luru understood now it was something he must do in the future.

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A movement shook Luru from his grief.

‘Is there anything —?’ The man's tone suggested impatience more than a desire to help.

‘What happened ... afterward?’ Luru recognised now Long's narrow forehead and sharp cheekbones in the man's face. But this man's elongated eyes were different from Nguyễn's round-eyed family.

‘No-one went hog hunting after that. And since the white-faced people came, no hogs have been seen either. Driven away by the ghastly foreigners,’ he whispered, peering at the visitor with a peculiar look. ‘Why did you ask?’

The man was baffled by visible pain and something else unreadable in the visitor's expression. He looked impatiently at the other visitor, aware of a sense of familiarity about this imposing person. He was certain he had not met this young man – such a striking figure was impossible to forget – but he must have known someone bearing resemblance to this stranger. The young man was looking at him now.

‘You must be Đát's son's oldest son?’ He spoke through his tears.

‘Who are *you*?’ The man screeched.

The visitors looked at one another.

‘*We* are ... the lost hunters. We've just returned.’ The towering young man announced.

An ugly mask of horror distorted the man's face. His lantern swept a bright arc and crashed into the doorjamb, rebounded sharply and fell from his hand. It shattered on the terracotta floor, sending a spray of glass and kerosene across the weathered surface. A tongue of flame leapt from the flickering wick onto a puddle of kerosene. The spreading liquid turned into a rivulet of fire that ran along a channel between the pavers. The clicking of a metal ring rolling across the line of fire was drowned out by the slamming of the door, which shook the roof and sent fine dust floating down the veranda. The man's screams died away with the footsteps running down the hallway into the heart of the house.

The flame thinned. The fire string broke into strips that quickly shriveled up, leaving the friends in the dark.

Nguyễn gathered his belongings and let his feet take him down the dilapidated staircase. He moved, unseeing, through the dark garden and joined Luru outside the gate.

There was a full moon just above the bamboo thicket. The crickets' ree ... ree stopped momentarily when the bamboo tubes creaked with a passing breeze then resumed again, more energetically. There were rolling hills dotting the open fields to the river, a life cord connecting the tiered land and villages along its course. The alpine terrain and waterway had formed a permanent outline against the distant peaks of the mountain, unchanged through the seasons when viewed from this place. It was a perfectly illuminated picture. Yesterday.

Luru blinked. A grubby sky was partly blocked by strange dark shapes that grew from the ground. No hills or river could be seen from here now: only jagged outlines of roofs and skeletal constructions, whose square eyes stared indifferently down on the unfamiliar land. He looked at Nguyễn walking away, hunched and lurching into shadows, and followed him. It would not matter where they were heading. There was no-one expecting them and no place for them now.

They trudged through the soft ground in the dark and arrived at a grass patch on an embankment by the river's elbow. Nguyễn dropped his pack and sank to the ground. Luru joined him and spread himself out on the grass, searching the dull, moonless sky. The Great Bear was hideously fractured. Half of its head was missing and severed limbs were scattered on banks of leaden clouds. The Little Bear was all but annihilated. Only the tip of its bright tail, the Northern Star, and a speck of its gleaming snout remained. They, too, had vanished when he next looked up.

Darkness paralysed the night. They might have been by the riverbank for minutes, or hours. Luru blinked. Another sky, five nights ago. Every hair-width of space was filled with stars. Thousands. No, millions. Millions of stars jostling for space. The Bears and Swan and Serpent and Dragon were all alive. Often, when he lay down on top of the Fansipan mountain, he felt as if he was floating in the upper atmosphere. The Northern Star seemed just above his nose. After leaving the Hall that night, he had believed they could keep going, anywhere, and still make it back with the constellations lighting their way.

Now the space above him was empty. There was nothing to guide them home.

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The night stretched on.

Luru had died again and again in every one of his childhood nightmares, only to find on waking that he was still alive. Nguyễn relived the saving of animals and properties, survived

storms and adversities abroad, only to return to a home burned down by a shattered kerosene lamp on the front veranda. Confusion and heartache were all that separated wakefulness from dreams. Luru found himself lost in a wilderness bearing a cross between a decayed Flower Valley and a defaced Tịnh Vân, but he could not find any human or creature. Nguyễn relived reaching out to Luru on the ledge of the lookout, but they both fell into a darkness that swallowed up every sound, themselves turning into the same black liquid that drowned them.

The friends each gradually came out of their delirium. Sleep – albeit badly broken – afforded them a degree of merciful numbness. From time to time, a sluggish breeze stirred the leaves and brushed the bamboo tips together, sighs followed by whispers. When the next breeze came, Luru sat up and breathed in moist air from the river. It smelled all wrong. There was no scent of ripe fruits from the orchards; no mellow bouquet of freshly cut rice stalks that had been unmissable summer scents. He emptied his lungs. The smells of putrid mud and acrid smoke remained in his nose and throat, spreading a bitter taste on his tongue.

It was unbearable for him to look at the empty sky. He lay back and folded his arms, turning over to press his face into the damp grass. This was one of the smells of his childhood. Days in the fields with Nguyễn and the village boys. Quiet times in the garden with his mother. Breaks during school hours. Fresh grass. Sunshine. Laughter. Luru's heart contracted. His father's sparkling eyes, firm pats, approving nods. The creaking of his medicine bag. Traces of dried herbs, powdered roots and sharp tinctures lingered in the air where his father had passed. His mother's tight hugs and tender smile. The soft wrinkles around her eyes and mouth accentuated the joy on her face. Her sweat was a magic blend of summer fruits, roasted nuts and baked sweets: the smell of home, of safety, of love. He yearned for them all, even for the mundane struggles that made his old days purposeful. He mourned for the people who had once filled his life, along with lost hopes and dreams that had disintegrated in time like scattered embers vanishing in the dark.

Luru shut his eyes. With each memory relived, a part of him revived, while another part died. Each loss was a subtraction. *Can I still be when all that I was has been taken away? Can nothingness endure?*

In the longest night the young men had ever known, their tears ebbed and flowed. Their hearts broke and mended only to be broken again, and they bled in silence.

Until dawn.

Chapter 11: Mistakes at the Market

A mountain owl's mournful call came with the first grey smear from the east. Gradually the dark blanket over the land dissolved. Luru had been sitting up for some time, examining the unfamiliar shadows surrounding him. Little by little, the grey shroud thinned, revealing a space beyond the patch of grass he was sitting on with Nguyễn. In the full light of day, there was no denying the strangeness of the silhouettes crowding the village.

Gone were the sweeping fields interspersed with rolling hills and terraced rice slopes. Gone were the farmers tending their plots and the white egrets gracing the tranquil expanses on their long legs, or drifting in flocks like clouds against the blue mountains. Gone were the swallows swooping and soaring in the clear sky. Now the hills were covered with foreign houses in rows. Flat, black roads like ink strips divided the new settlement into geometric shapes with sharp intersections. Tall buildings in the foreground crowded out the mountains; only in the gaps between them was there the palest suggestion of a former landscape.

Luru looked inwards. The old village was as vivid in his memory as if he had seen it only yesterday. He knew its every nook and cranny. Through the years growing up in the embrace of the land, he had stored in his mind its countless images like paintings; miniatures and panoramic views recorded in every season and under innumerable lighting conditions. He remembered the fierce sunsets with bold slashes of orange and red above the deep blue mountains; the pale dawns awakening the fields from their slumber, calling the colours to rise from their common misty grey to vibrant patches of green, yellow and purple.

The first time he remembered gazing upon the land was like an infant's recognition of its mother's face. He had known love and belonging that grew stronger, unbreakable, as his life progressed. This was the place he had always been drawn back to, to replenish and restore himself, to be whole again. How could he replace such an indelible love that had been the very fabric of his being? How could he relearn this place when the old landmarks were all destroyed? The vanished monuments, sacred to memories of the people and space this land once held, along with the marred landscape had diminished him.

Something moving fast entered his field of vision, interrupting his thoughts. Jolted back to the present, he focussed on the moving target: it was unmistakably a person – a man, judging by his clothing – perched on a flimsy frame joining two thin wheels in a line. The man appeared to be steering the frame, holding on to a curved bar attached to it just above the front wheel. As the rider whizzed past, Luru noticed his knees lifting and falling in rhythm with his feet pushing

in open stirrups connected to rotating handles. He was left dumbfounded when the man-on-wheels disappeared around the corner.

Hearing approaching footsteps, Luru turned to face Nguyễn.

‘Did you see ...?’

Luru’s question was cut off by a loud, stretched-out honk, followed by a string of snappy beeps. The friends quickly located what had rudely scattered people and some ducks off the road. They had seen these things the night before: self-moving boxes rolling out of the shadows. Their reappearance in the daylight – three in a procession down the main road towards the central precinct – redoubled the friends’ shock from the previous night. The young men had been weary by the time they arrived at Nguyễn’s house, and had since been drained by grief. Disoriented by so many strange things, they had begun to think they were in some inexplicable nightmare that would disappear in the daylight.

But no.

The friends stood frozen in a renewed fear that wiped out any shred of doubt about every improbable thing they had heard and seen since they returned. When the boxes were only little squares disappearing in the distance, Luru looked at Nguyễn and his fear gave way to a new kind of grief. He took in Nguyễn’s sunken eyes, the spark in them had been blotted out by impenetrable shadows. The short hair framing Nguyễn’s temples was flecked with grey. His complexion had taken on a strange pallor as alarming as the hollow-cheeks on the once square face.

‘Sit down,’ Luru said gently. ‘We should eat something.’

The last time they had eaten was at the Cloud Castle in the Realm, and only drank water on their way back. Nguyễn nodded. His mouth was so parched he found it hard to speak.

Luru unlaced his pack and took out the water gourd. It felt light. He removed the stopper, peered inside and shook the gourd. No sound. He tipped it into his mouth, tilting it higher until it was vertical. Nothing. Nguyễn shuffled over to rummage in his own pack.

Luru grabbed the food boxes. He had not touched the meals his mother had prepared since he left home, neither had Nguyễn. There had been no need with the offers they had received yesterday from the generous hostesses. Luru’s hands shook as he untied the lạt strings on the largest food box. It seemed strangely light. Some of the twines were tangled together. He pulled and tugged at them but could not break the tough strings. He looked around impatiently and grabbed the sword to hack off the knots. His hands trembled on lifting the lid off. There were some twig-like grey pieces at the bottom of the box that instantly disintegrated into powder. He choked with fury, seeing what was left of his food.

Crushing the food box in his hands, Luru inhaled dust and gagged at the taste. He was wracked with anguish but no tears came, his dry and hot eyes fixed on the ashy foodstuff. He recalled what his mother had told him was in the boxes she had packed for them and was quite sure there was com lam: steamed jasmine rice in bamboo pipes served with grilled pork and roasted vegetables. There were also assorted homemade sweets and dried fruits.

‘There are treats for you both in the round box,’ his mother had said with an enigmatic smile. ‘But eat the big one first.’

‘Yes, mother,’ was all he’d said while rushing off, leaving her to pack the rest of his provisions. His mind at the time was fixed on the hunting gear he was yet to select and sharpen.

Hugging the food box, Luru recalled the path leading to his family’s home on top of the third rise. He imagined the exhilarating run up the first crest and flying down the steep descent. A wide left turn followed by a sharp right elbow, where he often took a break beside a cattle stable nestled in an arc of golden bamboos. He remembered watching the cows grazing in contentment, shielded from the harsh winds while resting under the generous shadows. He could get home from there with his eyes closed: only a short walk ahead would take him to the foot of the third rise. Luru breathed in, expecting to catch the pungent odour of cattle mingled with the earthen scent of cow pats that heralded homecoming. An assured arrival.

Fifteen steps. A landing. Six steps. A right turn. Twenty four steps. A small garden with boulders, some with flat tops and the perfect height to sit on. A sweeping view of the valley opened from the right side. Eight steep steps. A narrow landing. Three more. An evergreen hedge framed an entrance with a low gate. A curved stone path across the inner garden. Four steps. The double varnished red-brown doors stood out from the lighter brown earth-and-timber walls. Sixty steps from the street to his door. Luru had counted habitually from the day his mother first taught him, step by step, his hand nestled in hers. Patterns had become as indelible in his mind as the lines on his mother’s face. Many years later she had taught him the cycles of the ancient Chinese Zodiac: twelve animals representing the ‘inner persons’, ten ‘states’ representing the contexts of their environments. The combined cycles repeated every sixty years.

‘Like coming home,’ he had chimed.

‘Yes, my son.’ His mother had smiled proudly, hugging him and rubbing his head. ‘Yes, like coming home.’

Is the house still there? If it was, Luru didn’t think he could make himself knock at its door. He could not bear being back in the childhood home without seeing the dearest people in his life. It felt like a sacrilege that strangers were taking his parents’ place in the home his father had built for the only love of his life; every piece of furniture, ornaments and practical items had

been lovingly chosen for the family and held so much of their history. He was an only child. Whoever had taken possession of the property after his parents had passed away might have emptied out his home. He thought of the family altar filled with portraits and bài vị bearing details of his ancestors. Where could they be?

My portrait would be on altar among the ancestors’. The thought came as a shock and Luru grieved at the bitter irony that his parents would have poured their hearts into preparing *his* funeral following his presumed death, but there were no children to attend to theirs. His parents’ portraits would not have been together on the family altar, if one had survived the other; or perhaps both portraits would be missing, if they had passed away at the same time. He could not bear to think of the dark, lonely years the single surviving parent must have endured after burying the love of his or her life, the last family member. But neither could he bear the thought of their dying together.

Then he remembered Cúng Thắt: the Buddhist release ceremonies and offerings dedicated by family and friends every seven days for seven weeks from the day a person died, to ensure comfort and a safe passage for the deceased person on his or her final journey to the Golden Springs. In his absence, there had been no-one to fulfil those all-important final preparations for his parents. Their souls might have been lost on treacherous paths, leaving them languishing in despair and eternal darkness. Pain radiating from his chest on realising, for the past century, there had not been any prayer or offering for his parents. There had not been any Đám giỗ, the annual Death Anniversary ceremony to commemorate their lives and honour their love and legacy.

He remembered his parents’ tears and sorrow in the first few Anniversaries after his grandparents’ death. But there had always been a banquet put together on the day for the ceremonial offering that included not only the best, but also the favourite food of the person being honoured, lovingly prepared – at times over two days – by his mother. As the years progressed and the grieving had eased, each Đám giỗ had been a much-anticipated event, especially joyful for children, when extended family and friends got together. This had always brought a lot of fun, beside enjoying special dishes and sharing memories of the beloved person, whose life had given cause for the celebration. Among his many filial failings, Luru understood his missing a hundred years of precious opportunities to share his parents’ Đám giỗ with others had been *his* loss, for he had let their memories die with those who had known and loved them.

Grief speared him at the thought of his parents’ final years, of their inconsolable isolation and hopelessness after he had vanished. Their loss compounded his. Their pain and his coalesced. His body shook.

*

The stillness was suffocating. Luru glanced at Nguyễn, whose face was pressed into his knees, shielded by his folded arms. They had not spoken since last night. Nguyễn's crushing grief had dulled Luru's pain. More than family and friends, Nguyễn had also lost his beloved fiancée, Hiền. Luru knew the losses they had both suffered would always be a shared darkness, but one they could never speak of.

Luru leaned across and pulled his pack over. He lifted the silver pouch and laid it in his lap, emptying the contents and assembling everything he possessed in a row. Four food containers: two round, one square and one rectangular. Three packs of assorted medications. The rosewood gift box containing leaves and seeds of medicinal plants from Lady Minh. Two knives. A pipe, a heavy wrap, two spearheads. A paper-thin, extremely sharp blade concealed in a leaf-shaped ivory case: a rich patient's gift to his father before Luru was born, presented to him on his first hunting trip. A scarf, a coil of rope. A torch and tinder box. Some coins. Luru wished he had heeded his mother's advice on spare clothes and footwear.

Luru ran his hand over the silver pouch, feeling its cool silken material with the tips of his fingers. Unbidden, the radiant face of one he loved appeared in his mind. 'Nga,' he called silently. His chest throbbed with joy and pain equally fierce; he could not separate the erratic beats of one from the other. His heart was full and he barely noticed his hunger. Finding the pouch was markedly lighter, he fumbled with the knot and undid it with clumsy fingers. He slid his hand in and scooped out the Peach of Longevity with his palm. His breath caught in his throat – the glorious fruit had withered to a quarter of its size. It continued to shrink on his hand until there was only a layer of wrinkly brown skin draped over its stone. He stared at the ugly lump, heard Nguyễn gulp, but could not look up.

'*No. Please ...*' Luru felt tears welling. The stone's sharp ends dug deeply into his palm. Having nothing left but physical pain to anchor him to the realness of his being, he felt himself crumbling along with the divine gift.

His mind returned to last night on Nguyễn's front porch, when the lamp had slipped from the man's hand, ricocheted off the doorjamb and smashed on the floor. Behind the wall of smoke and flames, his parents' faces had appeared. His father had lunged forward. His mother had reached out with both arms, her mouth moving fast, her hands shaking. The fire had drowned out their words, smeared their features, their forms withered and consumed by the flames.

Luru buried his head in his arms.

*

The sun had come out from behind the clouds. It must have been close to midmorning, judging by the sun's angle. The previously quiet streets had come alive with people moving about on their business. Nguyễn was standing with his back to Luru. Luru watched him descend the sloping bank to the river inlet. He stooped and filled his water gourd, took a long drink, refilled it and headed back to their patch of grass. He handed Luru the gourd without saying a word. Luru was grateful for that. He took the proffered drink and drank deeply.

There was a strange aftertaste to the water: algae-metallic. Nguyễn had disappeared behind a bush. Luru sat inertly, his heart was heavy. A dull ache permeated his body but his mind was numb. The ringing of another man-on-wheels hit him like a shower of arrows. *Who are we in this alien place?*

*

Luru gathered his scant belongings into his pack. Nguyễn returned and gave him three just-ripe persimmons. He seemed almost his old self again: quietly affable, industrious and hospitable. Luru's spirits lifted and he tucked into the luscious fruit, savouring the cool, sweet pulp on his tongue, mincing the satisfying crunch of the jelly flesh encasing the stone. Nguyễn's smile spread to his eyes, seeing Luru tucked into the persimmons.

'Where'd you like to go first?' Luru handed the empty water gourd back.

'What do you think? Kim Hùng Carpentry is closer, but it's usually busy at this time of the day. Bạch Mã Dispensary is further away, although Thu Cúc might be in today ...' Nguyễn stopped abruptly, remembering the people in their time now belonged to a distant past.

Thu Cúc had been chosen by Luru's parents as a potential daughter-in-law. A studious young lady who came from an ancient family of renowned scholars, her proficiency in the domestic domain was regarded as highly as her ability to produce prescriptions and dispense them. She had been as visible and active at the White Horse Dispensary as her male relatives in her father's employ. The oldest of six daughters, Thu Cúc and her future husband – whoever had the good fortune to marry her – would inherit her father's empire, prestige and social standing. This added to the attractions of Thu Cúc's genteel upbringing, her refined and charitable character and, most irresistibly, her beauty, rumoured to have 'cured men's illnesses upon sighting'.

Rumours had been circulating among villagers that Thu Cúc had been smitten with the young physician since last summer, when Luru was seated next to the heiress at a wedding. Luru respected and was fond of Thu Cúc, yet their meetings were often awkward and all exchanges had revolved around medical topics. Not knowing how to help Luru make progress with this good match, Nguyễn thought it was a pity that the expectations of both sets of parents appeared to

have undermined the youngsters' chance of a natural courtship. In the heat of preparing for the hunting expedition, Luru had promised his mother that he would visit Thu Cúc on his return, and would make their relationship a priority from then on. Nguyễn would lend his support on any occasion that brought the two together. Then Luru had met Nga. Even in such a short time, Nguyễn had no doubt his friend had been *hợp hôn* by the noble girl.

‘Kim Hùng Carpentry,’ Luru said quietly after a long silence.

Nguyễn took the lead. They crossed the rickety bridge and headed east. The Golden Bear carpentry, a brown L-shaped complex, used to be visible from the top of the embankment. Now the friends had to rely on their memory to find it, picking their way along strange roads and new paths between high buildings crammed into a once open field. The streets were crowded. Throngs of people came and went from houses, market stalls and shopfronts that provided services they did not recognise. Peddlers sold their wares on footpaths: raw-silk dresses, hand-woven shawls, hemp satchels, wooden carvings, incense, semi-precious stones, home decorations. Fruit baskets, dried sweets, grilled meats and vegetables: a psychedelic kaleidoscope of colours, smells and sounds in the mounting heat of midday.

After a considerable time traipsing back and forth, the friends stopped under a clump of trees on the main road leading to the central district. They had finally identified an intersection that looked like the nearest corner to the carpentry, but there was no sign of it. Luru and Nguyễn were parched, but returning to the river for a drink was unthinkable.

Luru shaded his eyes with his hand, peering towards the south. ‘Perhaps we should go to Thanh Long carpentry. We may get to see the owner during his lunch break.’

‘All right.’ Nguyễn was reluctant to go to Thanh Long partly because it was on the other side of the village. Despite being the bigger of the two main Carpentries and Furniture Makers thus giving him a better chance of finding work, he had always liked Kim Hùng better for its smaller size and the close-knit feel among their staff. Besides, it was closer to his home, and the Golden Bear had been the main supplier of timbers for his customers’ orders, so Nguyễn had known very well the owner and his staff.

‘Should we ask for directions to Kim Hùng? It might have been relocated,’ Nguyễn suggested.

Looking around, he spotted a man standing in front of a shop across the road. He gestured to Luru with his head and started walking. The man had been watching them and their eyes met as Nguyễn crossed the road. The man seemed startled and hesitated for a moment before fleeing inside. He pulled out the extendable metal grill, barring the entrance to the house.

Leaving only the space above the front counter as a window, he disappeared into the shadows within.

The friends were puzzled and dismayed. The streets were almost empty, people had retreated indoors to escape the heat. The trees' shadows had shrunk to mere smears barely covering their roots. The friends stood there in a quandary, their hope of finding someone to ask for directions was fading, when a man-powered carriage lurched into view. Reclined in the shaded rickshaw was a mountainous foreigner with glossy pink cheeks. He was dressed all in white, from his curious hard, round hat with little holes on the sides, to his clothes and shoes. Two shirtless youths, thin and brown as dried sticks, heaved the carriage forward. One pushed from the back, the other clung to the shafts at the front, straining with all his might.

Luru stared at the front youth's legs. Dark veins snaked down his calves, criss-crossing over his bare feet, bunching and stretching with each step like live worms. His blackened toes gripped and released the cobbled surface of the road. The two youths drove the rickshaw forward in a perfectly controlled rhythm. The carriage wheels tap-tapped on the stones; its passenger passed the two stunned watchers without so much as a glance. The bizarre ensemble soon disappeared around a corner.

The friends turned to one another. Nguyễn's bloodshot eyes were dark and full of anger. Luru had never seen him boiling with such impotent rage until the last few days, when twice, Nguyễn's fury seemed close to explode through his eyes. The first time was when he had stormed out of the village's packed Hall.

'Let's go to the market,' Luru said, sighing inwardly. He hoped he might be able to sell something for food.

The friends headed toward the central precinct. Nguyễn took the lead on the narrow footpath, his shoulders hunched forward on the rising slope. His right hand shaded his face from the blinding sun, while the weapons were tucked in a neat pile under his left arm. Luru searched for familiar landmarks but found only an intersection vaguely resembled the Y-junction, where the left branch led to the market. He began to feel lightheaded. *Please let this be the right path.* His legs grew heavy and his lungs laboured in the humid heat. For the first time in his commuting within the village, Luru felt the harshness of the hilly terrain in his muscles and bones.

*

The friends reached the street leading to the market and stopped under a stone arch. After a short break, Luru took over the lead. Snaking their way along the crowded street, they had to watch out for their bulky gear to avoid accidental contact with strangers, who at times walked shoulder-to-

shoulder or wedged between them. Luru looked around for weapons stores and spotted one a short time later. They stopped in front of an unmanned shop with a sign written in an unfamiliar language bearing sketches of knives and assorted tools.

They entered the small entrance and waited in a gloomy, cramped room that reeked of solvent, polishing oil, damp earth and metal. The air was close and musty like a cellar. An older man emerged from the back room, shuffling into the dark square behind the counter.

‘What are you looking for?’ He blinked rapidly in Luru’s direction.

‘We’d like to sell some weapons — ’

The man caught sight of Nguyễn, who was approaching the counter from where he had been examining rows of blades gleaming coldly against the motley wall on the other side of the room.

The man’s wide-eyed stare framed Nguyễn’s head and upper body. His face hardened as his gaze shifted to the weapon. Nguyễn’s steps faltered and he paused awkwardly in the middle of the room. Seeing the shopkeeper scrutinizing his weapons, he lifted them up on his palms, showing a hunting spear and a sheathed sword along with smaller items.

The shopkeeper’s face froze. Ugly lines carved into his face.

‘I ... I don’t deal with —’ he barked. ‘Get out or I’ll ... call the guards.’

The corner of the counter dug into Luru’s palm. Nguyễn flushed crimson. The shopkeeper glanced at a wooden pole standing in a holder beside the counter. Nguyễn had disappeared in that brief moment.

Luru grabbed his gear and flew out the door. Something stuck in his throat, blocking his breath. Anger rose like a fever from his chest to his head and flooded his body. His ears and face burned. He spotted Nguyễn some distance away and raced to catch up. The shopkeeper’s look had stung him like a poisonous bite spreading fast through his veins. The street swam before him. He swallowed and blinked away the hot water in his eyes.

Luru fixed his eyes on Nguyễn’s square head with the weapons’ skywards tips on his left, keeping track of him as they each threaded through the dense crowd nearing the market. Despite Luru’s speed, the distance between them increased and he lost sight of his friend when the street curved away. His heart sank as he rounded the bend. The street ended where the market began. Nguyễn had disappeared. Luru searched frantically for Nguyễn on both sides of the artery through the market’s main entrance, hoping to find him at a stall. Not a trace.

Luru pushed through the throng of people mingling by the last row of shops, dodged hanging racks and display tables spilling on to the walkway. Finally, he spotted Nguyễn, who was resting on a low brick border in a square column's shade.

Sweat rolled from Luru's temples, crept down his neck, slithered in cold runnels on his back. Observing his friend, he could not remember ever seeing Nguyễn in such a poor state: his dark clothes were frayed, grey with mud patches, rumpled. His shoulders slumped, a vacant stare on his gaunt face. Weariness showed at every bend in his body. He seemed lost. A pitiable, anomalous figure amongst a lively crowd.

The market hummed. It was early in the afternoon and there was a constant flow of people. Nguyễn's face brightened on seeing Luru crossing the street. Luru joined him in the paltry shade, thirst and hunger scraped his insides. They must go to the stalls soon with their few salable items and purchase some provisions, but lugging their gear through the crammed market in this heat would be madness. Luru debated going alone, leaving his friend with their belongings. Nguyễn could do with some rest.

'Hey, you. Hey!'

The friends looked around. The caller was a man in his early thirties sitting among a small group at an outdoor eatery some paces away.

'Yes, you.' The man tipped his head toward them. 'Where're you from?'

Nguyễn and Luru exchanged a quick look and scanned the faces of the men around the table: some were older than the asker, a few younger; curiosity, suspicion, wariness and some hostility were apparent. The caller's tone demanded an answer. They had none.

'What're you wearing?'

'Is that a *spear*?'

'A trident, ha! Where's *that* from?'

'Stolen.'

The men stood and shoved their chairs away. A rush of feet and voices closed in on the friends. The commotion drew passers-by. Shouting and obscenities escalated, hurled at the two strangers by the jostling bodies forming a tight circle around them.

'Mother f***ing thieves!'

Nearby eateries and shops emptied. A motley crowd hemmed the friends in. A shower of voices hurling questions, speculations and accusations thickened the confusion, with new people pushing their way closer to see the sitting targets.

'That sword's a lowland hunter's!'

'Guards!'

The confounded friends froze. Luru fought his urge to run. Running from this mad crowd would be accepting their accusations, could make things worse. He had been acutely aware of barbed stares directed at them on the streets. He had to shake them off to continue walking to the market, but it was not lost on him how different they looked from others around them. He remembered the man who had fled from them and locked himself in the house-stall. The weapons shopkeeper's vicious look came to his mind.

A glob of spit landed on Nguyễn's cheek, clinging to the spot and sagging under his left eye. He looked up to collect the vomit of foreign words splashing onto his face. Nguyễn grabbed the bully and lifted him off the ground. He flung the squirming bully off, scattering a bunch of noisy onlookers like squawking chooks. Chaos broke out as the foul-mouthed oaf flew like a squealing rice sack and landed with a thud in the newly opened section of the circle. Nguyễn held him down by the throat with his sword.

Silence. Men on the inner circle froze. Others shrank back. Some fled, screaming for help from a safe distance away.

Nguyễn could not stop the convulsion taking hold of his limbs. His hands shook. A red speck appeared under the tip of his sword. He stared at the dot as it grew into a fat drop on the smooth, pale throat, and continued swelling under a shiny red membrane. The blob broke, sending red liquid feathering into creases before snaking away into the shadow under the captive's neck.

Luru took the sword from Nguyễn's hand. The crowd stirred but no-one came forward. The aggressor lay motionless on the ground, his lips grey, his eyes glazed.

Clutching the sword, tip pointing down, Luru stood beside Nguyễn. He stared down the glares. Weighed the anger. Took the challenge.

'I am Luru, son of physician Trần Thanh Lâm of Xóm Three.' His deep, calm voice commanded the crowd's attention. 'This is Nguyễn, youngest sibling of mister Tạ Đức Long of Xóm Seven.'

He surveyed the crowd, noting surprise, confusion, doubt. Less hostility. They were listening.

'We went hunting two nights ago and were lost in the woods. We spent what seemed like a day in a ... an unknown country.' He took a deep breath, willing his nerves to calm. 'We returned last night ...' he searched for words but no-one cut in on his pause, 'and learned that we had been missing for a ... hundred years. We were told this by ...' he looked over at Nguyễn, 'by someone who claimed to be his great-nephew. He shut us out.'

Luru was sweating with the effort to engage the crowd, to express himself clearly. But hardest of all was to put into words – for the first time – what had taken place over what still seemed like a day abroad for himself and Nguyễn. Despite having been through a succession of bizarre events since their return and seeing the place that both was, and was not, Tịnh Vân village, he was still grappling with disbelief in their experience. The impossibility of his story was against them. It could be held *as* evidence for their wrongdoings and accusations that had been hurled at them by these strangers. Who would believe them?

Their lives were in danger. Luru scanned the crowd for responses.

Chapter 12: Faces and Fists

Disbelief. Confusion. Suspicion. Anger, fear, hatred and mixtures of these showed on the faces of those surrounding Luru. Traces of pity and concern appeared on some faces, but the silence was stony.

Understanding. Luru searched for it among the grim crowd.

Nothing.

Nguyễn pushed forward to speak just as a troop of men in uniform stormed down the street. The crowd dispersed like dried seeds in the wind.

Three men descended on Nguyễn at once. Two twisted his arms backward, spun him around. The third and largest man jumped on him, throwing his weight onto the hands clamping Nguyễn's shoulders, pushing him down.

'What ... why...?' Nguyễn wrestled with many hands on him at once.

Two men were on top of him. Another tied up his wrists.

'He nearly killed me ... killed *me*,' the bully shrieked the moment Nguyễn was overpowered. He crawled out of hiding and hopped around, jabbing his finger at Nguyễn.

'NO!' Nguyễn lunged forwards but the guards held him. 'I didn't! He spat on me, insulted me!' He shouldered one guard off and shrugged himself free of the other. 'I would've killed him if I had wanted to. I just held him down.'

'Shut up!' A punch landed on Nguyễn's cheekbone and an exploding pain rocked him. 'No one asked you.' The big guard's voice rang above the ringing in his ear.

Nguyễn staggered back. The place swam before his eyes. Pain spread like hot, thick glue down the side of his face, rising to his temple, blurring his vision.

'Jail him!' the bully yelled.

'Get lost!' The big guard swatted aside the annoyance crowding his heel. 'Go report your own stupid antics!'

'How dare —' The bully yelped. 'I'll report you too!' He scuttled away from the guard's reach.

The chief guard turned back to Nguyễn.

'Where're your papers?'

'What ... paper?'

The guard's eyes were already on Nguyễn's breast pocket. They scanned his body, hovered over his trouser pockets. The guard's jaws tightened. His stare sent chills through Luru, but Nguyễn seemed simply puzzled.

'Your *papers*.' The guard spat and took a step closer.

Unsure of what he was looking for, Nguyễn searched the chief guard's square, unusually flat face with its fat, purple lips. The man could be any age between mid-thirty to early fifty. There was something familiar about the narrow, cruel eyes under sickle eyebrows. Their cold glint jolted Nguyễn into searching his memory for another face he had known, unearthing an obscured connection to pain. A flashback to a line of boys, heads bowed, filing down the school's shadowy corridor; each boy's face was momentarily illuminated by a slant sheet of sunlight ...

'Tiểu bạ đâu?' A resounding slap swung Nguyễn's face aside. 'Don't play dumb. Your I.D. Residential registration. Work permit. Your pocket PASSBOOK?' The volume rose with each phrase, the flat face thrust closer toward his.

Nguyễn blinked. He was confounded by the spray of saliva on his face, the new burning on his cheek. His ear rang. The man's bad breath hung in the space between their faces. *Are these alternative names for the same papers, or each a different piece?*

'I ... I don't have them —' Nguyễn turned away.

The guard shoved him. 'Gông him up!'

Several hands grabbed him. Nguyễn twisted his body. Elbowed a guard. Stomped another's foot. Kneaded a short guard in the loins. He straightened up just as the chief guard blocked him. Iron hands gripped his shoulders, forcing him down. Nguyễn rammed his head into the thick chest.

A pair of hands shoved his back. Nguyễn stumbled forward. A punch landed on his temple. A foot crunched into unprotected flesh on his left side and felled him. The chief guard punched his target. Nguyễn was blinded by the savage beatings, unable to shield his head and upper body with his tied arms.

At the chief guard's command, five men locked a bamboo gông on Nguyễn. The simple structure resembled a short ladder with two adjustable middle rungs that fit firmly on either side of a prisoner's neck. A neck gông was a device of many purposes: it enabled guards to tie prisoners singly to posts or string a group together. It slowed down the accused, prohibited any help to the wearer and paraded the power of the authority by publicly shaming the men or women for their alleged crimes.

Nguyễn slumped on his bottom when the guards had finished with him. The gông's parallel stumps were like a pair of alien arms protruding from his neck. The coarse bamboo rungs pressed onto the sides of his throat like stiff giant fingers feeling for his pulse, ready to choke out his life. Nguyễn wondered how many necks this particular gông had been attached to, and if any head had been severed upon the removal of this device. A guard kicked and spat at him, telling him to get up. He looked up and saw Luru, battered and also gônged, leaning on a post some paces away.

Disbelief and fury exploded in him. Nguyễn scrambled to get up but fell back, his balance compromised by his bound wrists.

'My friend,' he cried. 'He didn't do anything wrong. Why gông him?' He faced the chief's guard. 'WHY?'

'Shut up.' The older guard flicked his head.

A punch landed on the side of Nguyễn's head. He reeled and righted himself.

Luru sat motionless, unable to look away from his battered friend. A pink bruise on Nguyễn's cheek was growing mauve laces around his eye, its tendrils reaching his temple. A crumbly line of dried blood ran like a red dirt track from a cut on his lower lip to his chin. Luru throat constricted, he could taste salt on his tongue. The metallic smell of blood filled his mouth and nose.

'Enough,' Luru croaked. 'Take us to the mandarins.'

'Đi!' The chief guard snarled.

The minor guards hurried to collect the friends' belongings. Nguyễn was shoved along the road heading to the village centre. Some steps ahead, Luru was being escorted by two guards. He was limping.

Nguyễn recalled wandering the streets with Luru that morning, remembering how self-conscious they had been, attracting uneasy glances. That was infinitely better than being paraded now in bonds and gông. Trudging across the village, he felt the midday heat intensified with contemptuous stares following them. He thought bitterly of how pieces of rope and bamboo lengths – farmers' everyday materials – could be turned into devices of constraint. He raged at the thought that, to onlookers, they were not only outsiders but also criminals. He fought to refrain from hurling himself at the guards. Words and reasons had proven useless, for their efforts at verbal exchanges were met only with inert faces.

They arrived at a levelled platform facing the monstrous construction that replaced the village Hall. The chief guard exchanged words with two gatekeepers in dark uniform. One of them unlocked the gigantic gate, letting them through in a single file. Luru observed the cold,

dark eyes of the gatekeeper; his expressionless countenance seemed to have been cast from the same metal the iron bars were made of. The gate clanged shut. They were locked in a vast enclosure: a silent space with no familiar features, beyond the perimeter of the known world.

The group shuffled across the empty yard towards a colossal yellow building. Luru lowered his head to avoid the blinding sun, noticing his battered footwear. He could barely hear the scrunching of footsteps on the gravel. Looming ahead was a flaring staircase that tapered off at the top, where a portico perched high above the ground, supported by round columns between wide arches.

Luru felt lightheaded. His parched tongue was furry and coated with bitterness. A memory of the morning's cool and sweet persimmons came like a cruel taunt to his thirst.

'Move!' The big guard barked.

A fist slammed into his shoulder blade and the ground rose towards him. Luru fell onto an angled body and scrambled up. He blinked and looked up, realising Nguyễn had thrown himself forward to cushion his fall. Luru took a ragged breath, feeling hollow and dazed. He willed some strength return to his limbs and exhaled gingerly at the sight of the imposing staircase.

'Let them take me ... upstairs,' he rasped at Nguyễn.

Nguyễn stepped back.

'Đi!' The chief guard yelled, shoving a guard onto another. 'Drag him up!'

Nguyễn was left to make his way up alone, aware that with his hands tied and the neck gông stuck on him like an unwieldy horn, he might tumble down the stairs with nothing to break the fall. Standing at the top landing, the chief guard glared at him, something in his look sent a chill through Nguyễn; his mind searched again for another face from the past, bearing a similar look.

The group entered a foyer lined with pictures of foreigners. Along the walls were framed documents stamped with red seals and some glass cabinets displaying artifacts from gold-trimmed filigrees to bone and stone implements. They were stopped just inside the door by a stocky man in a beige uniform; he ushered the chief guard to a desk on the right-hand wall then promptly returned to the waiting group. The chief guard answered alternately to two men in white uniform behind the desk: one made notes in a thick book with a black cover; the other, who appeared to be senior both in age and position, stood up – a squat, cranky man. The senior raised his voice in irritation. All eyes were on him but the waiting group could only catch some words from across the large room: *'permission ... informed ... No! ... clearly not ... first ... Me!'*

Nguyễn looked away. Anger and frustration welled in him. That man clearly wanted to show his authority, yet his way of spitting for talking and his grinding emphasis every few words

grated on his nerves like an incessantly barking dog. The other man finished his notes, closed the book and disappeared into a doorway further down the hall. The chief guard ground his teeth and looked away. The older man's yapping continued despite losing some momentum with no direct audience. Minutes later, the younger clerk returned with a tall foreigner in a white uniform. The yapping stopped. The tall man said a few words to the chief guard, who nodded with relief. He swaggered back to the waiting group, a mixture of pride and exasperation on his face.

‘Vê!’ He barked at his men, sounding surprisingly cheerful. He threw Nguyễn a pointedly hateful look before instructing his inferiors to hand over the friends' belongings to two approaching security guards in beige.

The tall foreigner approached them, followed by another stocky guard. The friends observed, for the first time and at a close hand, the foreigner's mud-cloured eyes, his thin lips and sharp nose on a symmetrical, curiously inscrutable face. The accompanying guard led the detainees down the hall, carefully emulating the white man's speed and maintaining almost exactly the same distance a few paces behind him. Nguyễn noticed the white man's relaxed manners were at odds with the security guard's tension. He constantly tapped the thick truncheon on the side of his leg or in his opposite palm. Except for the clerks, there was something foreign about the local men in this building that he could not identify.

They turned right into a passageway. Nguyễn slowed, giving way to Luru in the narrow corridor as the group advanced in a single file. They took a flight of stairs down, turned right again and arrived at a row of dark green doors. The security guard stopped and waited outside the second door with the detainees, while the white man went inside and closed the door behind him. Some time passed. The door opened. A local youth appeared. The security guard stepped back, letting the youth usher Luru and Nguyễn inside. The guard flicked Nguyễn a glance just as he passed; it was not a warm look, but something close to sympathy, a kind of quiet encouragement. Nguyễn stared after him, wondering if it was just a figment of his imagination.

‘Nhanh lên!’ the youth hissed beside him. He was a scrawny boy, half Nguyễn's size, barely a teen, yet the icy, malicious look from the wizened boy sent a chill through him. The youth turned abruptly and scuttled ahead.

‘Kneel!’ The boy shouted in a shrill voice, dropped to his knees and bowed.

Still waiting at the doorway, the friends were startled by the sudden command. The boy waited for a moment, raised his head slowly and eyed his targets.

‘Kneel!’ He screeched.

Nguyễn looked into the room. Two foreigners were sitting behind a dark-wood table. The tall man who had led them here looked weary. His partner, an obese man with a shiny pink face

supported by multiple chins, scrutinized the young men in neck-gông with a mixture of curiosity and disdain. On their left were three mandarins sitting behind a narrow desk, all dressed in long black traditional áo thun and white trousers. On a side table in the right corner sat a tray with a tea pot and china cups. Two barefoot local men sat on a long bench against the wall, both dressed in black button-down tunics and slacks; their faces were blank.

The friends glanced at one another and moved forward together. They stopped behind the boy, waiting.

‘Why don’t you kneel?’ quacked the leftmost mandarin.

‘Why?’ Nguyễn looked at him. The creases on his face were running with sweat, his sour expression looked like someone tasting spoiled food.

‘You *always* have to kneel in front of the mandarins,’ spat the oldest mandarin in the middle.

‘We’re not begging for favours, nor have we done anything wrong,’ Nguyễn retorted and instantly regretted his response.

‘Why are you here, then?’ the oldest mandarin snapped. All the lines on his face were turned down in a wrathful look.

Hostility was almost palpable in the room. Nguyễn bowed his head, silently berating himself for putting Lưu in danger with his hasty reply.

The mandarins whispered among themselves. They stopped and looked up when Lưu stepped forward. And waited. The oldest mandarin waved his fingers at the third one, a round-faced man in his thirties, who cleared his throat and lifted his chin, staring at Lưu.

‘What’s your name? Why are you here?’ His voice was sharp and cold with an accusing tone.

‘My name is Trần Phúc Lưu, son of physician Trần Thanh Lâm of Xóm Three. This is Tạ Đình Nguyễn, youngest sibling of mister Tạ Đức Long of Xóm Seven.’

Lưu spoke evenly. He paused and noticed some surprise and discomfort on the faces around the room. No one stirred. He waited a little longer, took a deep breath and continued.

‘We went on a hog hunting trip two nights ago. We were lost in the upper border of the woods and spent a day abroad in a ... an unknown country. We returned last night and were told —’ he gulped, ‘were sent away ... by Nguyễn’s great-nephew.’

Stiff silence was in the room. The scrawny boy got to his feet, his body still in a deep bow as he scuttled away and hid himself between the bench and the side table. The obese foreigner frowned, turned to his colleague and said something in their language, but his gaze

remained on Luru. His face turned crimson at the other's short reply. He barked something at the mandarins. The oldest one jumped and answered in broken foreign sentences, then turned abruptly to the black-clad men.

‘They’re lying. Nọc chúng ra!’

The tall and muscly men were instantly beside Luru and Nguyễn. One grabbed Nguyễn's gông, shoved him face-down and planted a foot on his back, knocking him forward. Blows rained down on him. Kicks, punches, knees and elbows. He found himself curled up in spasms on the floor. A mandarin quacked. The hitting stopped. Nguyễn's ears rang but, at the same time, they were muffled to the sounds around him.

‘Kneel, I said,’ the oldest mandarin screeched.

Nguyễn sat up and winced at a stabbing pain in his ribs. Something dark blocked his right eye. He rose gingerly to his knees and looked to his right for Luru. Realising he was only a few paces from the foreigners' desk, he turned back and gasped. Luru's nose had disappeared into a swollen bleeding mess, blood continued dripping to the floor. One of Luru's arms sagged to the side, despite still being bound to the other at the wrist. The glistening tip of a bone protruded just below Luru's oddly angled elbow, stretching the skin into a transparent membrane; his fingers were swollen and purple like mini-eggplants. Nguyễn bit his tongue. Luru had no part in this. He, Nguyễn, must take responsibility for his mistakes, alone.

‘You lied.’ The oldest mandarin raised himself from the seat, waving a piece of paper. ‘It says here you were reported for attempting to steal from a weapons shop, and were arrested later for nearly killing an innocent man.’

‘No,’ Nguyễn croaked, ‘that was a m—’

A punch landed on his head. Stars burst in blinding colours as his face smashed into a shoulder. Bracing himself for more, he was surprised when the shoulder remained still. Lifting his face, Nguyễn realised Luru had thrown himself forward to cushion his fall, risking the savage beating aimed at him. It seemed that Luru's unexpected move had confused the torturers.

‘No-one asked you,’ the sour-faced mandarin screamed. ‘It's stated *here* that you stole goods and clothes before arriving.’ He tapped madly on the piece of paper. ‘You're thieves and imposters!’

Nguyễn struggled to get up, when a swing-kick sunk into his middle. He doubled over, tasting a bitter juice from his empty stomach. Next to him, Luru was quaking soundlessly on the floor.

‘Stay kneel, you bull-headed bastards.’ The round-faced mandarin spat. ‘You scum are incapable of learning, *phải không quan?*’ Nguyễn felt his skin crawl as the rough tone directed at the detainees turned abruptly into a sickly sweet drawl when he spoke to the oldest mandarin.

Luru raised himself slowly, breathing through his mouth. A glance at Luru’s face emptied the air from Nguyễn’s chest as if he had taken another kick. There was fresh blood in Luru’s mouth that filled the creases on his lips. A fat bruise under one cheek distorted Luru’s face and squeezed his eye to a slit. Luru caught Nguyễn’s eyes and shook his head slightly, with a ghost of his reassuring smile.

Please. Nguyễn pleaded. *Let me tell them.* Luru shook his head, his eyes were determined. *Leave it to me.*

Luru sought out the tall foreigner. He seemed to be the only one who could be reasoned with. As if a call had been made, the foreigner shifted his attention from the squabbling mandarins to Luru. Luru held little hope that he could communicate with this stranger, not speaking his language; yet he strove to communicate through his eyes, persuading the man for a chance to defend themselves. The tall foreigner stirred in his seat.

‘Ask him about the incident in the market,’ he ordered the mandarins, speaking in a quiet, authoritative voice. His pronunciation of their mother tongue was accurate and clear. Luru’s heart hammered.

The oldest mandarin glared at Luru and banged on his desk.

‘You heard him. Speak!’

Luru bowed his head, acknowledging the order, then he turned to the tall foreigner.

‘We went to the weapons shop to sell some of our weapons but were ejected before we could explain our intention.’

‘The *market* incident, didn’t you hear, filthy scum?’ the sour-faced mandarin shrieked.

Luru glanced quickly at the mandarins then turned back to the foreigner. ‘We were taunted and ridiculed by some local men for our ... unfamiliar clothing and weapons. Some called us names. My friend lost his temper when a man spat on him. He overreacted —’

‘So it was your *friend* who nearly killed an innocent man?’ The foreigner raised his voice.

‘No. He only —’

‘Why doesn’t he speak for himself? Enough from you!’

Luru bowed his head, fearing for Nguyễn.

‘My friend spoke for me —’ Nguyễn uttered contritely.

‘Enough! You’re both liars. He spoke to better deceive us.’ The foreigner’s voice was cold, cruel. ‘The man you nearly killed is a son of an officer. He is well educated, attended a French school. You attacked him out of spite and uncontrolled temper.’ He turned to the torturers. ‘Beat the truth out of them!’

Disbelief and anger shook Luru. The unfounded abuse and accusations hurled at Nguyễn, at both of them, choked him. He reeled at the contempt in the foreigner’s eyes, at the hatred in his words. The shock of seeing through his reasonable exterior to the cold, prejudiced heart splintered his hope.

A hail of fists, elbows and knees landed on Luru’s head and body. A hook-kick knocked him several paces away. His head smashed onto the floor, a million stars came to his eyes. His tongue and facial muscles convulsed, the spasms cascaded down his body to his limbs.

‘Haul them up!’ a mandarin barked.

Luru’s neck-gông was yanked abruptly from behind. He wheezed. His head throbbed and his ribs burned but he forced himself to stand up. A kick behind his knees brought him down.

‘Kneel, you dogs,’ another mandarin screeched.

Pride, pain and anger boiled in Luru. Each was redoubled at the thought of Nguyễn.

‘Esk ... umm ... their closes end ... weep-puns.’ The reedy voice from the obese foreigner scraped at their hearing. His Vietnamese was far inferior to that of his compatriot.

What do those have anything to do with why we’re here? Luru studied the bright pink face shiny with sweat, finding no emotion in the foreigner’s eyes.

‘Where did you steal your ... outfit and equipment from?’ The oldest mandarin was making an announcement, rather than asking a question.

‘I’ve seen similar articles in Hà Nội’s museum,’ the round-faced mandarin chirped.

‘Shut your mouth! I *know* where they’re from. Let’s hear how well they can weave their lies!’

Luru stared at the old mandarin, bewildered. *Why ask us, when you’ve already decided what we must say?*

‘Speak!’ The oldest mandarin banged on the table. ‘Start again. State your names. Where you came from. How did you steal those freakish outfits and weapons?’ He ground his teeth impatiently.

Luru watched the down-turned mouth moving. But it was the dull, milky eyes that caught his attention, reminding him of a dead frog floating belly-up in a pond after a torrential rain. The mandarin’s irritating voice morphed into frog’s croaks. Luru stared at the dead frog still making noise and was shaken out of his hallucination by another bang on the table that rattled the cups.

‘Your attempt to craft more lies won’t save your skins. Confess to your wrongdoings or we’ll thrash the truth out of you.’

Luru felt a tremor spreading through his body. He hoped it was fatigue rather than a strange illness that had taken hold of him. The truth might kill them, but that’s all they had. He took a deep breath and lifted his head.

‘I’ve told you. My name is Luru. My parents’ home was on the third rise in Xóm Three. These are our own clothes and weapons we left with two nights ago. This is Nguyễn. His house is still in the first lot in Xóm Seven. You can check this with his great-nephew.’

The old mandarin opened his mouth but made no sounds. His face muscles twitched, the pupils shrank into muddy speckles. His nostrils flared.

‘Lũ này lão!’ he screamed and sprang up, knocking back his chair. ‘Nọc chúng ra!’

Blows rained down on Luru. Head. Stomach. Thigh. Lower back. Each came with a different sound on impact; all produced agony that spread through his body, weaving a sticky cloth of pain, where individual contact points became indistinguishable.

A warm stream erupted from Luru’s nose. The metallic tang on his tongue the memory of the hog’s mangled carcass covered with hungry flies. Something urged him to shift his body away from the heaving shadow. Wading through the thick swamp in his mind, Luru tried to work out the connection between the dead hog and why he must move his body, when he fell into darkness.

Chapter 13: Lies and Truths

Luru woke up to a sharp birdcall that died away in a mournful wail. *Morning*. His automatic response to the natural wakeup call was to go through his tasks for the day. But it was still dark and he did not know where he was. He tried to turn but could not move his head or any part of his body. Every breath he took was agony from the hairs on his head to his toes. He was filled with dread at his apparent paralysis that also seemed to have immobilised his mind. He tried to recall what had taken place but it seemed an impenetrable blackness had swallowed up his memory.

Now and again, flashes of unfamiliar images jolted him. Strange faces lurched in his mind: an oily, bright pink dish resting on a stack of wobbly chins; a dead frog spitting human sounds; a flat face with cruel eyes and big purple lips. A patch of bright blue sky swallowed up by a blinding sun. Thirst tore at his throat. A steeply rising road. Nguyễn with a neck-gông, his head hung low. Fire. His face in the grass. The metallic taste of blood.

Slowly, fragments of past days returned. His head throbbed with the effort of sorting nightmares, old and new, from actual events. His disjointed memory continued producing strange pictures. Words rang out inconsequentially among disparate images. *Imposters. Lies. Steal*. They eventually arranged themselves into an order that shocked and grieved him.

Truth, the frog mouth had screamed. Whose? He had given the interrogators his and Nguyễn's names, who they were, where they had lived, but everything he claimed now existed only in their memories. *It's a pity you can't see our minds for all your effort at destroying our bodies*. He remembered now. Yesterday finally came back with excruciating clarity. Anger shook his body. *No! I won't extend their power over us by letting the memory of their interrogations continue tormenting me*. He willed himself to break free from the humiliating memory, forcing his eyes to focus on this new place he was now in.

A grey wall. Scuff marks and brown patches across the rough surface, defaced in places by dents. Flakes of peeling lime wash hung like burst blisters on parched skin. *Where am I?* Luru's hand felt the bare floor, seeking a grip to heave himself up. He caught a whiff of stale urine in the dank air. *What is this place?*

'Luru?' Nguyễn's voice came from behind him.

Tears brimmed his eyes. Luru felt again the same desperate elation on hearing his friend's voice as he did that long-ago dusk, laying helpless and broken at the bottom of a pit. He wished he was in that place again, to be brought back to his parents, and Nguyễn would be safe. *That*

was over a century ago. He remembered sinking his fingers into the raw earth in that hole, trying to climb out. His nails slipped now on the hard floor. His impulse to challenge the Elders' order had brought them here.

Approaching footsteps cut into his thoughts. Low voices came closer and stopped outside the door. A jangling of keys, a brisk push and the door squeaked open.

Footsteps in the room. 'Your rations and water.' A man's toneless voice addressing no-one.

Footsteps retreated. The door slammed shut and locked. The jangling and muttering diminished.

Luru regretted not asking for some basic provisions to dress Nguyễn's and his own injuries. He must look at them. There was nothing worse than open wounds in detention squalor: infection was a certainty. He thought of the bitter irony of this as the only certainty in their lives now.

'Help me up,' he rasped. His throat felt like sandpaper.

Nguyễn slid his arms under Luru's shoulders and lifted him to a sitting position. Luru winched and retched.

'I'll get some water.' Nguyễn eased him against the wall and limped away, resting against the door as he took his water before bringing Luru his cup.

Luru lifted the greasy cup to his mouth, understood now the pauses Nguyễn had taken, as he took sips of water smelling of algae and fish. In spite of the revolting taste, and the throbbing pain that came with every little movement, the water was balm for his parched tongue and throat. Both his head and sight improved soon after, and he began surveying their cell.

It was a narrow rectangular cubicle wide enough to fit two single straw mats side-by-side. A low wooden shelf was set against the front wall to the door's left, where their tray of provisions sat. High on the back wall was a horizontal slit with a metal grille. Dusky grey filled the meagre opening in the otherwise closed room. Luru guessed it was early in the evening from the mauve tinge of light around the slit's edges. The walls were covered in layers of slaked lime, a cheap means to freshen up a dilapidated quarter, but the lower four-fifths bore grease stains and scars.

Luru shivered from a sudden chill and hugged his chest, surprised to find his tunic was wet. His hair was damp also. The floor where he was lying was cold and damp with traces of water still in the cracks on the rough floor.

'Why am I wet?' he asked Nguyễn, noticing now that his friend was shirtless. 'You too?' Nguyễn nodded.

‘What happened?’

‘They poured water on us. I woke before they came back. They splashed water on you again but you didn’t move. I feared for your head injuries ...’

Anger and humiliation coalesced in Luru’s chest. He struggled to breathe as he remembered the interrogation room. He could not see the point of their questioning, everything they said was dismissed or used against them. It was inconceivable that the methods of torturing were procedural. Could it be possible that the tortures were carried out for ...? He stamped out the horrible thought.

Luru couldn’t understand what his homeland had become. It was bizarre to be judged by a panel of local mandarins, who carried on an ancient tradition of ruling over commoners in conjunction with foreigners, who clearly held their power over the mandarins where they saw fit. How could two different sets of rules be applied together? What chance did commoners have to defend themselves against this impossible system?

He thought about their situation and realised it would take more than a conventional jury to investigate their claims and reaffirm their identities. Despite his usual inclination to assess problems optimistically, Luru had little hope. They were utterly alone. Being severed from the past, their future had also been forfeited. *I will give my life to change this for others if I can get out of this place*, he vowed to himself.

Nguyễn shuffled to the shelf and came back with the rice bowls.

‘Eat. It’ll be dark soon.’

In the muddied light, Luru’s eyes fell on the discoloured rice covered with dark green strips. He blocked out any memory of his home meals.

‘Here.’ Nguyễn took Luru’s bowl, held it under his chin and pressed a pair of chopsticks into his hand. ‘You eat first.’

Luru swallowed the lump in his throat, along with words he had never told Nguyễn. Once again, his friend had noticed his need and tended to it, naturally, as he had always done. Luru was not sure if Nguyễn had seen his injured hand, mostly he had kept it out of sight. Luru took a mouthful of rice, noticed the smell of mould. The pickled greens were soggy and over-sour, the only thing with a taste. He tried to finish his serve quickly and crushed some unhusked rice grains, their coarse shells scraped on his tongue. Luru struggled, and despite his awakened hunger, he could not take more than a few bites, leaving over half of the meagre ration. He rested his chopsticks horizontally cross the bowl’s rim.

‘I’m done.’ He spoke to Nguyễn’s hand.

Nguyễn sighed, put Luru’s bowl away and returned to his own.

Luru looked around the cell. A thin band of smoky purple showing through the horizontal slit in the wall. On the bottom left of the back wall, there were thin, longish shapes that resembled rolls of straw mats. Luru heaved himself up, winced at simultaneous stabs of pain on his body and limbs, and shuffled towards them. He fell on his knees to grab the rolls and was assaulted by a sharp stench. He turned away, gagging at the sickening smell of aged urine. He couldn't see the foot of the wall in full dark now but was certain there must have been a crack or a mouse-hole somewhere around the right corner that provided a natural urinal for desperate inmates over the years. He had picked up the smell even as he was regaining consciousness from the other side of the cell.

Luru ran his hand over the mats. They were dry. He pushed one towards Nguyễn.

'Would you like me to help remove your wet top?' Nguyễn could no longer see Luru's face, only broad movements in the dark cell.

'Yes,' Luru replied gratefully, settling back in his spot.

Nguyễn crawled over. 'Can you lift your ... broken arm up?'

Luru gasped at the attempt but stifled his moan. The wet top clung to him. He rolled it up and tried to wriggle himself free.

'I can lift the right arm. Can you pull the shirt over my head? I'll guide my left arm out.' Luru ground his teeth and pulled his broken arm free from the wet, sticky shirt.

'At least the gongs are off,' Luru muttered, remembering their marching through the streets with the unwieldy frames around their necks. 'Did they do it here?'

'No, they must've taken them off before they brought us here,' Nguyễn said. 'There's just not enough room for us here with those things.'

Nguyễn spread the straw mats out for both of them.

'What do you think they'll do with us?' Nguyễn asked after a long silence, when they were lying on their mats. Each was waiting for sleep to come but neither could shut down his own incessant thoughts.

'I don't know,' Luru sighed. 'They insisted on getting the truth out of us but refused to hear it. They had already made up their minds even before they questioned us.'

'Why would they want us to admit to crimes we didn't commit?' Nguyễn's voice rose in the dark. 'Why accuse us of stealing and such, when there was no evidence?'

'I guess they went with whatever the reports —'

'What about their accusing us of dressing up to deceive people?' Nguyễn sat up, leaning forward.

‘That’s easy. They don’t need any proof. Branding us as imposters, they can refuse our claims and make up anything about us that suits them,’ Luru said bitterly, remembering the interrogators’ shocked faces when he had announced their names.

‘They asked about some papers ...’

‘I was just thinking about it. They must be something introduced by the foreigners. Work permit and residential ... registration?’ Luru was baffled by the list of papers.

‘How are we going to obtain those?’ Nguyễn muttered despondently.

They fell into silence.

‘I wonder if there’s any chance they would send someone to check out our claims, where we lived and our family histories —’

‘No one’s left, Nguyễn. Everyone who knew or remembered us had gone. Unless they come to your house —’ Luru remembered the man’s terror-stricken face and his shattered lantern.

‘I doubt your ... great-nephew would —’

In silence each waded through his own unsolvable questions alone. Nguyễn had been quiet for a while, Luru hoped he was already sleeping.

‘If only I had ignored that foreigners’ boot-licker in the market.’ Nguyễn spoke suddenly, anger and regret weighed down his voice. ‘You wouldn’t have been implicated in this mess.’

‘We would’ve been arrested, sooner or later. From what they said, we had already been reported by the weapon store’s owner,’ Luru reminded him. ‘Besides, we stood out with our ... things. We were bound to be questioned —’

‘What do they want with us anyway? What would they gain from forcing us to admit to things we didn’t commit?’

‘I don’t know. Perhaps sending us to labour camps? Free slaves are not easy to come by.’ Luru was shocked to hear his own bitterness.

‘What good are we if they break and maim us through their questioning?’

‘We’re young. Our bodies will heal before long. Maybe their aim is to break our spirits. If we’re not disabled but carrying some permanent reminders of their power, it’ll be easier for them to keep their control over us.’

Luru fought to contain his despondent thoughts. *What would my parents have done in our situation?* He found himself asking the question when he could not see any way forward, imagining how each parent might solve the difficulty at hand, as he had sometimes done in the past. Rule-breakers, both his father and mother were; each had created their own track before their paths merged to form a new one. But they had broken rules in a society they belonged to

and made their own way in the place they had known well. Luru realised in despair that there was nothing from their past or his upbringing to guide him in this alien place filled with strangers. He remembered sailing down the river on their way back from the Realm, missing his people and homeland after just one day away, realising he would forever be a stranger in a strange land if they had decided to stay. But their day among the ethereal hostesses was a magical time full of joy and peace. Not this. Anger and grief clouded his memory of the bright day among welcoming company.

Unguided, Luru's mind drifted into memories of past evenings. Last night they were on a patch of grass by the river. No, he couldn't think of it now. The night before, they were trekking through the forest, full of hope and enthusiasm. Was it only two days ago? Three nights before that, he was kneeling in front of the family altar, praying to the ancestors under the loving, pleading eyes of his mother. He wished again, for just one moment, that he could see his mother to tell her they had survived the hunt. But how could he tell her they were captured and now living no better than caged animals? No, she was better off not knowing this. Luru tore his thoughts away from this dead end. Another night. They were in the Hall, fighting for their inclusion in the hunting expedition. *That* was a lifetime away. No. A century was always longer than any mortal's lifetime.

Nguyễn turned to him. 'Do you think we can escape?' Excitement rang in his whisper. 'How?' Luru's pulse quickened.

Chapter 14: Blood and Bones

Rattling sounds seeped into Luru's hearing. Roused by a sudden screech, he tuned in to silence, punctured at times by humming and hissing like air passing through a narrow windpipe.

Emerging from a viscous drowsiness, Luru managed to open his eyes a crack. A grubby wall. A dusky light that could have been an indication of early evening or dawn. He tried to move his limbs, located his free left arm and leg but they were immovable.

The noises came again, just behind him. Turning his head, Luru caught a stain in the shape of a deformed skull on the wall. He stared at the overlarge eye sockets as his ears picked up a new gurgling sound. *Nguyễn!* Gripped by fear, Luru lay helpless.

A teenage boy had collapsed in the field. His head was propped on a farmer's trembling hands resting on his lap. The boy's lips were blue; his eyes were losing focus. Jagged, shallow breaths did not move his chest. Frantic fanning of multiple nón lá by the circle of distressed farmers only pushed the hot air between them. They made little difference to the shortening breath, or to the persistent blowflies hovering over the boy's head. An enormous peacock-green fly dropped onto his face. Tipping forward on furry hind legs, it felt for a corner of the boy's mouth with serrated claws and began digging industriously at a sore ...

Luru gasped for air. His hand was warm, sticky. He flexed and squeezed his stiff fingers. A different memory had already surfaced.

The middle-aged woman shivered uncontrollably. Her hands were clammy, her forehead burned under the papery skin that creased and folded into deep asymmetrical lines on her sunken face. Her wheezing gave way to waves of coughs that shook her boney frame. Her eyes shone with a dull glow fuelled by a raging fever. Her unfocussed gaze was somewhere beyond the people in the room ...

No. Please ... Luru fought to block out the dreaded memory but it had already come.

The patient's closed room reeked of illness. Burnt incense, bitter tinctures and pungent ointments mingled with stale sweat and urine. Sitting propped up against a wall, the man's sharp bones produced angled shadows on such a painfully thin face that it was impossible to tell his age. Beside him was a stack of clean cloths. The man coughed into a square already in his hand, folding the red smears away with unsteady fingers. The mottled skin on his hand sank between his knuckles, hung loosely on the fleshless frame, accentuating the sharp bone protruding from his wrist. He shrank away at the sight of visitors.

Footsteps broke Luru out of his induced day-terrors. Forcing a response from his stiff body, he pulled his shoulder down and winced, falling on his back. A headache erupted at the same time as searing pains from his ribs. He breathed through his mouth, clenching every muscle to wait out the agony as sweat broke on his forehead, dampened his armpits and gathered in warm patches at the back of his knees.

Once a degree of control was restored to him, Luru turned his head a fraction. He was anxious to check on Nguyễn, who was lying on his stomach, one arm tucked under his head. A dark bruise on his cheekbone eclipsed the exposed half of his face and ringed his eye. Nguyễn's face was still, his lips were dark grey. Fear gripped Luru. He wanted to shake the lifeless-looking body to see if his friend was still ... *What if overnight Nguyễn had ...?* His chest tightened, he leaned forward.

‘Nguyễn!’

No response. Luru reached across. Nguyễn's skin was still warm. Luru held his hand over his friend's face, bring it to Nguyễn's nose. A moment passed. A current of warm air fanned his skin. He breathed out, weak with relief.

Footsteps stopped outside their cell. Indistinct voices and the sound of jangling keys seeped through the gap around the door before it was shoved open. Heavy treads entered the room.

‘Your congee and water,’ a gruff voice announced as a tray was set down.

Footsteps retreating.

‘Wait!’ Luru forced himself up and turned around to speak to the back of a tall, hunched man. ‘When you next come, would you please bring some —’

‘No.’

In dismay, Luru's attention was nevertheless captured by the man's pronounced limp. Watching his gait, stiff, with a sagging left shoulder, Luru wondered if the man was born this way. Traumatic injuries and illnesses that had left disabled patients roused his compassion. His broad shoulder caught on the doorframe, the man turned, showing a bulbous nose on a square face with familiar features. As if feeling Luru's gaze, the man looked into his eyes. Something akin to mutual recognition passed between them. The man narrowed his eyes. A spiteful look splashed on Luru's face like a dipper of cold water.

The door was pulled shut. Locked. The sound of heavy footfalls alternated by dragging diminished. Luru sank back. His head whirled at the man's uncanny resemblance to Nguyễn's hateful cousin, Bách. *It's impossible. This man couldn't have known us. But it's not impossible*

for Bách's descendants to thrive in their homeland and continue on his path, seeking power through working for foreigners. Luru wanted to dismiss the troubling thought but could not shake it off. *Has Nguyễn seen him?* Luru glanced back. Nguyễn was already up, leaning awkwardly against the wall. His eyes were a dull pink, his limbs folded crookedly.

Fighting against pain, Luru brought Nguyễn his ration. Returning to the shelf for his own serve, he braced his broken arm against his body, kneeled to bring his face to the bowl's level and ate with one hand. His appetite evaporated at the sight of the dark, lumpy gruel, but he shoved the first spoonful into his mouth nonetheless. The gluey congee was made the more unpalatable by a warring mixture of grains. Some undercooked lumps broke in his mouth and a smell of old sackcloth reminded Luru of farmers' pots of bran and vegetable scraps cooked for pigs. He struggled to swallow, left his scant serve unfinished and returned to his mat.

The friends sat leaning on opposite walls in silence; neither could bear catching the other's eyes. Nguyễn tried but found no words to express his appreciation for Luru's efforts in caring for him. He thought how strange, for the first time in their lives, they were together without anything to plan for. He felt mentally paralysed, not knowing what to expect or what was expected of them. Patterns that had once provided structure for their lives were gone. He had been robbed of even basic words and was furiously confused.

Nguyễn's hand went to the hog's tusk on a leather string nestled in the shallow depression above his breastbone. He closed his hand around it, rubbing his thumb against its rough side and absent-mindedly pressing the sharp end into his palm.

'Keep it with you always,' oldest brother Long had said.

'It'll see you safely home,' his father's voice had rung out as he pressed the revered heirloom into Nguyễn's hand, taking his breath away. His face was in the shadow, but the towering height, broad profile and slightly tilted head were unmistakably his father's. The lamplight had wavered in the dimly lit worship room. Nguyễn had taken in his father's coarse hand with the chipped nails of a carpenter, yet the thick fingers with well-defined patterns around the knuckles were not an old man's.

'Take care, little brother.' Long had smiled warmly as he patted his arm.

Nguyễn had stared at his brother's back when Long turned away. He opened his palm. The legendary amulet was believed to have secured his great-grandfather's safety and good health until his natural passing well into old age. Nguyễn could not believe it was now in his keeping. He had tried but could not find words for his appreciation. Long was gone by the time he looked up.

Luru's quiet cough brought Nguyễn back into the ugly reality of their imprisonment. Freedom that he had taken for granted until their arrest in the market now hinged on their ability to prove who they were and where they came from. He raged at the disparity between how they had been living and their now being locked up, despaired at the impossibility of proving their roots and identities.

Another cough. Nguyễn glanced at Luru and suppressed a shudder as images flashed through his mind. *Luru's pulpy body ringed by red puddles.* No. Nguyễn searched around the room for any distraction but found nothing in the blank space framed by the high window or on the grimy wall. *The puddles seeped into cracks and gaps, spawning a web of red veins around the body. Misshapen clusters grew from fat nodes and came alive. Hideous creatures swelled after draining the red pools, their gelatinous limbs stretched over the green-and-white tiles' diamond pattern, searching for more ...*

Nguyễn hugged his knees, forcing his trembling limbs to be still. *Just nightmares.* But there were things he didn't – couldn't – have imagined. The green-and-white tiles daubed with red. The crunch of a foot on Luru's ribs; the dull crack of his head on impact with the floor. The protruding bone that stretched the skin on Luru's arm, his mini-eggplant fingers. Nguyễn knew, no matter how hard he tried, he would not be able to banish what he had seen from his sleep, or worse, from his memory.

He waited for, and dreaded, the sound of footsteps. *When will this be over?*

*

The room grew brighter. From time to time, stillness was shattered by indistinct voices and noises near and far, but there was no indication of how much time had passed inside the cell. During the brightest part of the day, two guards arrived and took the friends to a different wing in an older section of the building. They were thrown into a small room with blotchy yellow walls. A rangy foreigner sat on a large plush seat toward the left of the room; his boney fingers extended from sinewy arms that overhung the armrest like pale claws on a giant bird. The man's hawkish countenance was reinforced by his narrow face with prominent cheekbones, thin lips, and an impossibly sharp nose. His impassive look did not soften the cold gleam emanating from deep, slate-coloured eyes that scanned the new arrivals.

The man's eyes moved from Nguyễn's bare torso to Luru's, pausing on a sunken area on his left ribs. He seemed captivated by the dark patch surrounded by red-and-purple tinged flesh. Nguyễn instinctively sought the man's eyes. He *must* know what was going through the foreigner's mind, seeing such damage, but the man's attention was firmly on Luru, or rather, his injuries. Anger rose in Nguyễn, noticing the foreigner's gaze was now hovering over the pulpy

flesh below Luru's collarbone that stood out in deep colours against his pale skin. As if drawn by unusual shapes and colours, the man's eyes quickly located next the rings of blue and purple on Luru's distorted arm. Nguyễn's stomach churned with an unknown fear, he had never seen such interest and detachment at the same time. He was determined to shield his friend as best he could from this man. The foreigner shifted in his chair, averted his gaze and resumed an air of indifference, but the satisfied look on his face was not lost on Nguyễn.

'Kneel! What are you waiting for?'

A thick, heavy smoker's voice brought Nguyễn's attention to two mandarins sitting behind a small desk further back at the centre of the room. Both looked to be in their fifties, well-fed men dressed in traditional long black áo-thụng, khăn-đồng headpieces and white pants. Irritation was visible from the bushy brows drawn together on the mandarin with a goatee on the left. The other was the speaker. Their eyes met. The mandarin's lips curled up, showing yellowed buck teeth covered in plaque. His glare turned vicious. *Kneel*, Nguyễn reminded himself and dropped to his knees.

'Why did you lie to the officers?' The buck toothed man pounced. This was not a question to be answered.

Unprepared for the ambush, Nguyễn stared at the speaker, whose flaring nostrils and enlarged whites of his eyes reminded him of a buffalo about to charge. *What do we do?* Nguyễn looked at the other mandarin for clues, but he was clawing at his chin hair; his eyes glinted slyly under caterpillar eyebrows. The foreigner looked amused.

'We ... didn't —' Nguyễn was exasperated by his inability to give a simple answer.

The speaker banged on the desk. 'You're here to *confess*, not argue.'

'We didn't lie.' Luru's voice rang out, subdued but firm. 'We told you – the other mandarins – the truth, yesterday.' His eyes held the mandarin's.

'Where are your passbooks?' Buck Tooth spat. *Caught you, liars*. His eyes gleamed.

'We've never ... had them. We left —'

'Enough!' He screamed. 'Make them confess!' He barked to his left.

Two barefoot men in black sprang from a wooden bench against the wall.

'Wait!' Nguyễn put up his hand. 'Please. Hear us out.'

'Tell us what we didn't know,' ordered the bushy-browed man in a scratchy voice, tapping his hand on a sheet of paper on the desk and stroking his goatee with the other.

Nguyễn hesitated. Yesterday's people could have recorded everything – or nothing – of what they had said. There was no point in guessing what might be on the sheet. It was clear their

statements had been disregarded. There was no time for him to state anything other than the most important facts.

‘My name is Tạ Đình Nguyễn of Xóm Seven. My friend is Trần Phúc Lư, son of physician Trần Thanh Lâm of Xóm Three.’

Buck Tooth leaned forward, open-mouthed. The other mandarin gripped his own goatee, his thick brows knitted into a squiggly line across his forehead.

‘Láo!’ Barked Buck Tooth.

‘How dare you take us for fools!’ The goateed man slapped the table. ‘You disguised your statelessness with stolen garbs —’

‘Bầm quan, không!’ Nguyễn raised his voice. ‘These were ours.’

‘Where did you get them from?’ The goateed man’s eyes narrowed. ‘You went about half-naked?’

‘No, quan,’ Nguyễn swallowed hard. ‘We took off our tops in the cell.’

‘Enough!’ Buck Tooth butted in. ‘Where did you steal them from?’

‘I’ve told you, these were ours,’ Nguyễn snapped. ‘We left with them.’

Buck Tooth leaned forward but Nguyễn cut in first. ‘We went hunting, were lost overnight in the woods and spent a day abroad. We came back the night before last and were sent away by someone who claimed to be my ... great-nephew.’

Anger was palpable in the room.

Buck Tooth’s lips and facial features rearranged around his ugly teeth. ‘That’s an ... an outrageous lie!’

‘Don’t paint tales!’ The goateed man half-raised himself on his seat with a finger pointing at Nguyễn. ‘Your nonsense story won’t fool us. Why were you arrested?’

‘We went yesterday to sell our weapons but were evicted by the storekeeper. At the market later, I held a man down with a sword for insulting us,’ Nguyễn said.

‘That’s not what was recorded here!’ The goateed man banged on the desk. ‘You were arrested for stealing, attempted killing and lying about your residency.’

‘You can check with his great-nephew in Xóm Seven —’

‘Make them *confess!*’ Buck Tooth yelled across Lư’s sentence.

Black figures sprang from behind Lư. The rain of fists, knees, feet and truncheons blurred Nguyễn’s sight and drowned other noises.

A cold splash. Nguyễn opened his eyes. A pair of legs in black trousers came toward him. Another black figure loomed behind. Someone bent to check on him. Nguyễn couldn't recognise the blank face looking at him or the splotchy yellow wall in the background.

‘Haul them up!’ The scratchy voice rang out.

Nguyễn was yanked from the floor. The room swam before his eyes. He had to take tiny breaths to avoid disturbing thousands of needles piercing his head.

‘Start again,’ came a low, heavily accented voice.

He remembered the foreigner's eyes on Luru and prayed that his friend would hold up. The questioning started again, much the same as last time. Luru answered before Nguyễn could put together what to say. Something continued ringing in his ears. When the next question came, Nguyễn caught only *kill* and *lie* among a flurry of words. Luru was cut off by someone who shouted an order to bring out something. A large basket was dragged out.

Nguyễn glanced at its contents: ropes, pole, bottles, cudgels, assorted whips, hooks, metal clips and other unknown items. His attention was caught by a strange instrument made from what looked like the spine of some creature. The vertebrae increased gradually in thickness from a thumb's width to a big-toe's toward the end, where it was attached to a solid black handle. The narrower tip of the spine was reinforced by a metal block. The implement lay like a pale spiny snake atop other devices. Nguyễn drew a shaky breath, comprehending the damage this barbed whip would do to flesh. His eyes shifted to Luru's bare back and he felt a chill spreading to his limbs.

The questioning resumed. Nguyễn repeated his name and Luru's, attracting a flurry of beating with truncheons. Unlike the day before, when his wrists were bound, Nguyễn thought he could shield his head and face from the beating, but his arms and shoulders were mashed into pulp. The questions came again, forcing agreement from the friends on their alleged stealing and imposture. Luru spoke against the accusation. Nguyễn watched helplessly as two black figures descended on his friend. His body shook, seeing Luru caught between eight moving limbs. When they stepped back, Luru was lying face down, motionless. The yellow-and-grey chequered tiles around him were smeared with red.

A man splashed water on Luru's head. Nguyễn choked down a sob when he heard a moan from the floor. Luru was yanked up the moment his lids fluttered and savagely pushed to his knees. Luru held his head up, supporting it with his good hand, his body covered with colours and welts, new and old. The questions started again immediately. What was their aim in trying to infiltrate the local community? Why carry weapons if not intent on harming or intimidating someone? Where had they been over the past years without their papers?

Luru struggled to keep up with the barrage of questions from both mandarins, and to *stay* up.

‘We were in another country —’

A kick to his head sent Luru sprawling. More abuse was hurled at them both. They were ordered not to fabricate any more lies. Nguyễn wanted to speak up but had nothing to add to what Luru had said. Worse, he feared any misspoken word would bring more harm to Luru. The questions came again, insisting on their admitting to conspiring with enemies and plotting against the government.

‘We *didn’t*,’ Luru rasped.

‘You asked for it!’ Buck Tooth croaked, waving to the black men.

Nguyễn froze with terror as one man grabbed the serrated whip. He threw himself forward but was kicked back by the other man as the first one cracked the whip over Luru. Nguyễn screamed and begged for mercy when the vertebrae column ripped into Luru’s bare back, tearing it open in a deep groove that instantly brimmed bright red. When the whip descended again, its flexible tail coiled around Luru’s flank like a live snake and took with it bits of his flesh. Luru clutched his torso and crumpled. Nguyễn slumped on all fours and begged that his friend be spared of torture. He confessed to inciting Luru on the ill-fated hunt and his outburst in the market. He was silenced by the very same whip that had just scoured Luru’s back. The walls and ceiling tumbled and Nguyễn found himself curled up on the floor. Scorching pain tore at his back, spread like fire over his shoulders. With utmost effort, he forced himself to rise to his knees. He sought but could not see the mandarins’ faces clearly. He bowed deeply nonetheless, his forehead touched the floor.

‘Please ... let my friend go —’

Chapter 15: Restorations and Rejections

They were running through a dark forest. The trees' gnarled shadows were closing in on them, blocking out precious patches of clear sky strewn with luminous stars.

'Quick!' Nguyễn called but heard no reply. He searched for Luru, who was running beside him but had disappeared when Nguyễn looked up at the dome of crisscrossing vegetation overhead. The rampant green grew into giant vines as thick as human limbs, reaching down, twisting and slithering around him in their search for more space. One brushed against his arm and coiled around it. He yanked free and ran hard.

'Luru ... Where are you?'

A thick wall of multiplying green muffled his voice. A sound came from somewhere ahead, distorted by a crooked path through random pockets of space. Was it Luru's voice or something else? He was not sure he had heard it at all.

'Luru! Luru ...' he shouted with all his might.

He lunged forward. The ground disappeared under his feet. He fell into a viscous blackness that gradually thinned. His stiff form shattered on landing. Head, torso and limbs scattered in different directions on the hard ground. A giant boulder fell atop his head. He moaned aloud.

Nguyễn was woken by the moan. His tongue was dry and stiff as baked clay. His throat burned. His head pounded.

He stared at a skull-shaped stain on the wall. He had seen it before. Perhaps from a different angle. Maybe further away. He was not sure how long they had been in this place.

At the beginning, he had noted the time of day by the meals they had been served. Porridge for morning. Rice with something hot for midday. Everything cold at night. Sometimes they couldn't get up to *get to* their meals, so for a while, there were two or three trays left untouched until they were taken away. Then the meals became less frequent. Time stretched and shrank in random patterns. Day and night intermingled and swapped order, or so it seemed to him. They were brought to different rooms, asked the same questions rephrased and announced by different mouths. The questioning faces had become indistinguishable after a while, with similar sneers and looks of disgust. They repeated their answers that brought similar beatings. He had heard and seen Luru from time to time but mostly on, or *from*, the floor. He remembered some of the interrogation rooms' floor patterns: blue-and-white stars, grey-and-purple flowers, orange-and-yellow circles. Once a circle was filled with red and continued growing into a

wobbly shape. Despite their being in the same cell and being interrogated together, he and Luru hadn't spoken for a while. He was not sure how long it had been.

It grew brighter. Noises came and went along the corridor. When it was quiet, Nguyễn strained to hear if there was any sound coming from Luru. He hoped Luru was still sleeping. *Of course he's all right.* No, he's not. *He's a physician!* He can't tend to himself now. *But he knows what to do.* He has nothing to work with. *He's alive!* Are you sure? *Yes.* No. *Please, not now!*

He promised himself to get up when morning meals arrived. He'd check on Luru and help him eat.

But the morning wore on and the silence thickened. Thirst tore at his throat. A bitter taste congealed on his tongue. Hot breaths fanned his nostrils. Water. He wished for a sip. A mouthful. A dipper full of cool, fresh water. He imagined hoisting up a bucket full of water from the deep well in his garden and tipping it over his head, feeling the cool runnels on his skin. He remembered splashing with Luru by the well after their long afternoon running in the hills. *Water.* He felt like crying, but his hot, sandy eyes could hardly blink. He tried to move but his body refused. *The meals should come soon.*

*

The light had softened when the sound of footsteps roused him from his mangled memories and, at times, his falling in and out of old and new nightmares. The confusion did not abate when someone entered the room. Instead of one man's voice announcing their meal, there were two, speaking in low, measured tones. Nguyễn caught some of their limited exchange: *days ... not moved ... drink ... improve ... interrogate.* Someone approached and lifted him up, propping him against the wall. A cup was brought to his lips, tipped gradually so he could take a hesitant drink. *Wounds ... bone ... sight ... fevers ... answers...* came the whispers.

Footsteps moved away. Shuffling. Coughs. *Luru!* Nguyễn lifted his chin from his chest, looking for his friend. He saw a pair of feet between two crouching bodies and spotted Luru's head leaning against the opposite wall. One man bent over, spreading something over Luru's broken ribs. Luru sat still but his breathing was painful. The men eased Luru from the wall and looked at his back. There were urgent whispers, then the same man began daubing something on Luru's back. Luru braced himself with his good arm against the wall. Nguyễn shifted his stiff limbs and sat up straight. It pained and relieved him at the same time, seeing Luru in pain but also being tended to. Luru was given more water, he held the cup himself and emptied it, much to Nguyễn's relief.

The men returned to Nguyễn and spread some ointment on his back. He convulsed at the pain. He remembered the whipping. On that night, he had woken up from a dream of being

burned alive. In his dream, he was tied down and the fire was spreading from his back over his shoulder. His screams had intensified the flames that soon engulfed him, and he had glimpsed Luru some distance away, burning like a giant torch tied to a post. He had shivered in a cold sweat afterwards. Now he was in the same shivering state after the man had covered his wounds with ointment.

Nguyễn and Luru were each helped to some runny congee that neither of them could taste or smell. The men dressed them in old, faded brown but soft tunics, and told them to keep them on for their ‘meeting’ tomorrow. Having been told to rest and recover for an important day ahead, they were left in the gathering dark when the men departed.

*

Nguyễn woke with a start to the sound of the door being forced open. His heart hammered as footsteps entered the room and braced himself to be yanked up.

The door had banged opened last night and commotion had broken out next door. There were screams and shouts, people were dragged away from their cell. Someone was begging for his life and was instantly silenced.

That wasn’t a dream. Nguyễn had been woken by the noises from a worse dream – himself and Luru in it – and had lain awake in the dark long after. He hoped his friend had slept through it. Wondered if they would be the next target; prayed that they were not. He speculated on where the poor men next door would have been taken, but hadn’t any clue. He wrangled with fear and hope until the thick black in the cell turned to deep blue. When the first early bird chirped, he heaved a temporary sigh of relief that the men would not return while it was still dark. When sleep came, his saturated mind sank into a strange dream, where he was traipsing through a rugged mountain in the fog, carrying all his gear and Luru’s as well. He searched for his friend, whose voice came back to him from time to time but always from a different direction.

Nguyễn woke to new voices in the room. They were local young men and his heart ached with hearing familiar sounds. One young man came closer, sat down with a bowl in his hand. *Eat*, his eyes encouraged with a hint of a smile. Nguyễn looked at the young man, someone around his age, they could have been friends. He struggled up and was given a hand. There was kindness and concern in the young man’s eyes, but it was clear he had been given instructions not to talk with inmates. He returned with a cup of water after Nguyễn had finished his plain congee and took a look at his back. The other young man took longer to check Luru’s ribs and back, and said to no-one in particular to keep their tops on at all times.

The morning noises drained away. Brightness filled the room. For the first time in days, Nguyễn had a proper look at Luru, who now seemed twice his age and half his usual weight. Their eyes met.

You look terrible.

Look who's talking.

What happened to your face?

How about yours?

Same thing, I suppose.

I'm dying for a wash.

Ha! You're dying anyway.

Im đi!

Laughter lines creased around Luru's mouth and eyes. Joy welled in Nguyễn. Bantering with Luru felt almost like old times. Their world had disappeared but somehow it was still – not bearable – but perhaps sufferable to have a lifelong friend near.

*

In the brightest part of the day, a guard came and took them up several levels to a new section near the front of the building. They entered a large, high-ceilinged room. The first thing Nguyễn noticed was the absence of black men and their boxes of equipment. It was strange to be led into the room without being yelled at to kneel, and it was unnerving to be facing what seemed to be a lot of people at once. Eight, in fact. Three mandarins, two foreigners, two locals in uniform and a civilian. Nguyễn's heart was in his mouth. He knew that face.

A mandarin introduced the foreigners and other people in the room, curiously leaving out the two friends and the local man. Next, he made some strange statements about claims and counterclaims by people whose names they were not familiar with about 'these two'. After a lengthy interlude, the mandarin came to the purpose of the 'meeting', to bring in a 'person of interest', who might be able to verify or disprove some of the claims.

Nguyễn heard Luru gulp beside him and prayed that whatever happened next, they would let him speak first. It had always been his fight, his history of being bullied by an older cousin and denying the family 'curse'. Luru had always stood up for him. It was time he resolved it, once and for all. A fleeting memory of the man's screams from last night returned but he quashed it from his mind. It was likely that they – *he* – would be taken away from here, soon, not during the night. But it was time to focus on what must be done.

He had missed some of what the mandarin was saying, but he was now calling on the local man to come forward. Nguyễn watched the man walk closer and repressed a tide of emotion from seeing his facial features in daylight.

‘This man claims to be Tạ Đình Nguyễn, your great-uncle. What do you have to say?’ the mandarin asked.

The local man, who had been looking at Nguyễn, turned to the speaker. Warring emotions played across his face, but he spoke at last with a strangely familiar voice.

‘These two men came to my house eighteen nights past. They asked about my great-grandparents and later claimed to be the lost hunters, my great-grandfather’s youngest brother and his best friend. I knew a little about my great-grandparents, who passed away before I was born, but I did not think the lost hunters could have returned after a hundred years. I sent them away.’

‘Was the name he gave correct?’

‘Yes, but —’

‘He could have asked around, I know. Could he have found out other details about your family?’

‘I’m not sure, it’s been a long time —’

‘The traditional scripts of their time were long replaced by the Romanised chữ quốc ngữ. Old records are accessible nowadays only to scholars specialised in the ancient language, not to ordinary people. We’ll ask him what he knew about your family. You can verify what he says against your knowledge. Shall we proceed?’

The local man agreed and the mandarin turned to Nguyễn.

‘State your parents’ and siblings’ names,’ he ordered.

‘My father was called Tạ Minh Toàn, also known as nine-finger Toàn as he had lost a finger in a childhood accident. My mother was called Đỗ Thị Hương Lan, but her parents had later shortened it to Đỗ Thị Hương, removing Lan from her name because it was suggested, being a fragile flower, it might have contributed to her poor health. My oldest brother was called Tạ Đức Long, followed by six sisters: Tạ Thị Thuý Loan, Tạ Thị Kim Liên, Tạ Thị Quỳnh Nhung, Tạ Thị Ngọc Vân, Tạ Thị Phương Thảo and Tạ Thị Minh Tuyết. An older brother, Tạ Minh Trí died as an infant, and I was the youngest.’

Nguyễn spoke, not seeing the people around him or the room he was in. He saw himself sitting once again at the large dinner table among his family, when both of his parents were still alive and all his siblings were young. He saw each of their faces as he called their names;

remembered the noise of his siblings' talking. He had to compete to gain his parents' attention when he wanted to say something or simply get off the chair but couldn't reach the floor with his short legs. He recalled once his oldest brother, Long, had reached over and lifted him down from his chair. His mother had smiled as he was set down.

The room was still when he looked up. The man was looking at him with strangely misty eyes.

'Who did you live with before you left?' the mandarin asked.

'My oldest brother, Long, and his wife, Strong, and their five children.'

'What were their names?'

'Đạt, Tú, Linh, Khải, Tân.'

'I take it that all the names recited were correct?' The mandarin turned to the man, who had only taken his eyes off Nguyễn once to glance at Lư.

Startled by the question, the man took a moment before nodding. He had not uttered a sound since Nguyễn started speaking.

'You mentioned something about a family heirloom before. Do you want to ask him about it?' the mandarin prompted.

The eyes that met Nguyễn's were full of ghosts. Nguyễn saw again his oldest brother, Long's measured look; his nephew, Đạt's inquisitive glint; his sisters' and sister-in-law's observant glances. Then all disappeared. The question was as sudden as it was blunt.

'The hog-tusk amulet. They said ... *he* left with it?'

Nguyễn had forgotten about it. At least over recent days. His hand went to his chest, finding the longish lump under his tunic. The man's eyes widened as Nguyễn pulled on the string around his neck. He gripped the amulet in his palm, suddenly afraid to show it to the circle of strangers, not knowing what they would make of it.

'Great-uncle!' The man cried and fell on his knees when Nguyễn opened his palm.

Nguyễn caught only fragments of what the man was saying, through his tears. That he had recognised great-uncle from that night. Confessed that he had been fearful and believed it was impossible for lost people to come back after all that time. That was enough.

*

Nguyễn and Lư found themselves by the side of the road. They were still wearing the old brown tunics they were given in the cell the day before. Their belongings had been returned to them, minus the weapons – to 'safeguard' them against 'misunderstanding' by strangers – as was decided by the officers in the room. Nguyễn's and Lư's identities had been verified in baffling debates neither had understood. The mandarins and foreigners had gained all they needed to

know. Besides checking at Nguyễn's former home, officers had also inquired about Luru. They had confirmed his family history and checked his parents' and siblings' burial sites. There had been debates about where they could get their papers and *what* names they should go under – *not* their birth names. It had been argued that their names should not be linked to their parentage, and since the young men should have been dead. This led to new questions and more argument about *where* to register as their birthplace and residential addresses. They couldn't be *here*, but these young men did not belong anywhere else either, for there were no records of them elsewhere. What were they to do? Someone decided it was best to send them away immediately. So their belongings were retrieved and they were promptly ushered out of the building.

Outside the dark metal gates, the friends headed north until they reached the foothills. They took a break by a flat stone not far from where Luru had found Nguyễn sitting by the roadside, after he had run out of the Hall that recent, yet long-ago night. They had less than they had started with, so they must work harder, even just for food. At least, they would attract less attention from strangers, wearing commoners' everyday clothing now, and they could move about quicker with lighter loads. They had lost a great deal, including their names, which they were allowed to keep, by order, only between themselves.

Nguyễn thought of the brief conversation with his great-nephew, while they were waiting for their packs and the officers were writing them each a temporary pass. He was standing with Luru. Both were confounded by the officers' debates about what to put on their papers, but neither friends could offer any suggestion for possible new names they would prefer. Nguyễn's great-nephew approached him and, without much preamble, stated his request.

'Please ... for *everyone*'s sake, would you not return to our home or reveal who you ... were?'

It was if a blow had emptied Nguyễn's lungs of air. He had stared at the man, his great-nephew, who bore Long's features and carried hints of his voice. He had not thought beyond how or whether they were to be released from this detention centre. But he had not doubted that he would return to his old home, to light some incense on the family altar, to *see* again portraits of his parents and siblings, to pray for their forgiveness and wish them peace. He knew he could rebuild his life, somewhere else, assuming he would return for visits. He would not ask for anything, except to join his extended family on special occasions. But it was not meant to be. The man had turned away and left.

'What are you called now?' Luru asked.

Nguyễn took out the paper from his pocket, unfolded it and ran his eyes down the few lines. He sighed and pushed it in Luru's direction. Silence. Some strangled noises then Luru burst out laughing.

‘What the ... is that?’ he spluttered.

‘Back to school, medicine master!’

Nguyễn found himself laughing along with Luru, unable to stop, seeing unexpected hilarity from the sheer lunacy of their situation. He found laughing was the best thing they had had since they came back and the only thing they could do in the face of bewildering trials they had been through.

‘How about you?’ he asked Luru when he could talk again.

Luru produced his paper from his pack. They both pored over it and laughed again, harder. The script on their papers consisted of strange curls and squashed circles, some with hats and whiskers that were impossible to decipher. Nguyễn remembered watching Lady Minh marking beautiful curls and flying symbols on the silken sheet at the Cloud Castle, feeling like it was only yesterday that he had marvelled at the mysterious script that contained messages of foreign matters unrelated to them. But now ... they couldn't even read their own names in their own country! He wondered what meanings their new names carried now, if there were any, and suspected that the very short statements omitted their birthplace and parentage. A strange kind of loss swept over him. He remembered, as a boy, watching from the roadside as a water chestnut rolled off a cart and was instantly crushed under a heavy wheel. The white, crunchy pieces, scattered where the chestnut had fallen, were ground down by passing carts and feet. When the road was clear of traffic, there were no traces of it left. He was dismayed by its complete disappearance in such a short time. He felt like that now, shattered by an unnamed and indescribable loss, mourning for his name and family history, among fragments of their once whole way of living, like pieces of water chestnut under strangers' feet and the mindless wheels of time.

*

Luru put his paper away and, after rummaging in his pack, took out the rosewood box. He opened it and found little drawstring bags of leaves and seeds, wondering what was best to use for their wounds. He found a cardboard box at the bottom and lifted it out. Inside, covered in a layer of heavy silk, were two soy-coloured round cakes, two brown balls and two dark green cubes. He lifted the box to his face. The heavenly smell of vanilla, coconut and soy cake mingled with herbal essences set his stomach rumbling.

‘Look!’ He brought it across to Nguyễn.

Without prompting, the friends each grabbed a cake. It had been *so* long since they had something that tasted that good. Nguyễn remembered the fabulous meal and treats at the Cloud Castle. This cake was not served then, but he had no doubt Lady Minh had prepared these treats for specific purposes. Next they ate the brown balls, then the green cubes, both smelled strongly of herbs; the first carried a hint of orange, the second contained peppermints and liquorice. They did not need to know what was in them, but were certain they needed them, more than food, as they must have been infused with medication.

‘Let me see your back,’ Luru said after they had finished.

He heard Luru’s sharp intake of breath. The hand resting above his shoulder closed into a grip. Luru unfolded a paper package and shook some powder over Nguyễn wounds. A tingling sensation rippled across his back but it was not unpleasant.

‘I’ll put some on yours,’ Nguyễn said.

‘No,’ Luru folded the packet away. ‘I’m ... fine. There’s not much left anyway.’

‘You can’t look after me if *you’re* going to get worse.’ Nguyễn took the packet from his hand.

He made Luru sit down and lifted his tunic. He felt sick at the gaping channels on Luru’s back. The skin was barely knitted around the edges. At least the rims were clean and showed a uniform pink, but the central lines were still raw, weeping in some parts. He shook the powder over the wounds, praying that it would work without any complications.

They packed everything away and considered where to go before nightfall. Water. They had not had a drink since their late morning meal. Shelter. They knew a number of crevices at the base of the mountain where they could rest overnight. Arriving at the nearest mountain spring, they filled up their gourds and had a quick wash, unable to immerse themselves under the water. They headed up the mountain just as the sun was setting.

They were lying safely between natural rock walls under an opening that let in a piece of clear sky when it grew dark. The stars came out, faintly at first, then crowding in as the night deepened. They had been resting in silence, in a fragile kind of peace that they had somehow found in isolation, away from the new people and place that was once their beloved homeland.

‘Nguyễn ...’ Luru called quietly.

Nguyễn turned to him in the dark, waiting.

Luru took a deep breath. ‘Do you think we should try to ... return ... to the Realm tomorrow?’

‘Why not?’

Nguyễn's spirits lifted at the suggestion. The prospect of a new trip and revisiting that wonderful place had already filled him with renewed energy and excitement. Tomorrow. They'd forage some provisions and pay a visit to the welcoming people in their hospitable land. He turned aside, smelling warm grass. He fell asleep seeing golden light reflecting off the water and the colourful fields of the Flower Valley.

Chapter 16: Fire and Flood

Nguyễn's eyes opened to pale blue with wisps of white. Birds' calls cleared away the last cobwebs of his slumber. *Where is this place?* He had not seen clear blue or white for a while, except on tiles ... The birds' song started again, now a chorus. He closed his eyes and opened them again. *Sky?*

Nguyễn sat up, stretching luxuriously on the patch of dry grass. Memories of last night, then some earlier parts of yesterday, gradually returned to him in reverse order. He embraced images from the moment they had been set free and locked the remainder away. It would be a long time before he could look at them again. They were still too close, too raw. He wished there was some kind of ceremonial procedure to lay memories to rest, so he could be free of these burdens, feeling guilty and grateful at the same time that he did not have to carry them alone. *Luu*. He thought of the horrors they had shared as the scars they would carry hidden under their clothes, even as their minds began to heal.

How *fresh* the air smelled on the mountain! Dirty walls, a stain the shape of a skull, the stench in the closed room returned momentarily, but he fought back and held them firmly away. No more. They had papers now. Although they could not yet read them or know their new names, he was certain they would find ways to begin a new life. This was what his and Luu's parents and siblings would have wished for them, and he vowed that, for as long as he lived, he would strive his best to honour them.

Luu was nowhere to be found, but all their packs were still in the same place in the far corner of the natural shelter. Nguyễn took a short walk, picking up the scent of pine in the morning breeze, and went further away from the main path to relieve himself. He came back to find Luu busy laying out some food on a cloth he had spread on a patch of level ground.

'How ... where did you get them?' Nguyễn was amazed.

'I bartered a few things we won't need for now.' Luu grinned. 'I went to the market early just as the street vendors were setting up their stalls, to avoid the crowds.'

Nguyễn's stomach rumbled. He appraised the food set before them and copied Luu, going first for the steaming hot corn still fully wrapped in its natural covers. He peeled away the layers of semi-transparent silk, taking in the sweet aroma of freshly boiled corn as his teeth sank into its juicy kernels. *This* is what he had missed. Simple, wholesome, everyday farmers' treats that they had often enjoyed on the first day of the corn harvest or, at times, as rewards from their mothers. He remembered fondly how the children had gathered around the largest pot packed

with whole cobs brought home straight from the field on harvest day, the cornsilks still glistening with morning dew. Best of all were the times they had cooked and eaten them in the field, during their morning breaks after working since dawn, or during night gatherings, when family and friends got together to hear epics read aloud by a grownup, or listen to oral stories of ghosts and fantastic tales told by elders. The sweet, heartwarming smell of corn – boiled or roasted in woodfire – had always been attached to happy memories.

They enjoyed next a serve each of xôi khúc, large balls of sticky rice housing a savoury core of smooth mungbean and marinated pork strips. It had been a long time since they had had this treat. Nguyễn's heart swelled remembering how his mother, and later, sister Strong, used to make these for the family, remembered waking up in the early morning with the smell of steamed xôi khúc wafting up from the kitchen. For some moments, he felt like himself again, like in the old days, before setting out with Luru. Much had changed now, but still – they were once again enjoying treats on a mountainside, and would be heading to the Realm soon for a visit.

They saved the rest of the food. Most of it was grilled or baked and would keep for a few days without being spoilt by the heat. Luru suggested they leave their packs behind, concealed in the cave, taking with them only a few essential items, their water gourds and roasted peanuts still in their shells. It was unlikely that they would need any of their own food once they reached the Realm. They went back to the stream to refill their water gourds and take a proper wash. It had been *ages* since they had felt this clean. Nguyễn laughed as Luru left the water and began to tease his friend about making himself presentable before seeing Nga again. He stopped mid-sentence. He blinked in disbelief and walked closer to Luru.

‘What is it?’ Luru was curious.

‘Your back,’ Nguyễn croaked, ‘it’s ...*healed*.’

‘Show me yours,’ Luru said.

Nguyễn turned around. Luru's hand was instantly on his back; his cool, wet fingers were tracing lines on his skin, moving across from lower left to just above his right shoulder. No pain. Nguyễn wondered if his scars looked like Luru's, smooth and silver, almost unnoticeable. The friends looked at one another. Neither recalled any pain or discomfort last night. Perhaps they both had slept too deeply to have felt anything. But the healing? They each recalled the ointment they had received in the cell; the cakes and packets in the rosewood box that remained intact while all their packed food had disintegrated with time. Luru made a note to ask Lady Minh about the ingredients in each item, but he knew neither of them would have the words to thank her for the extraordinary gifts she had bestowed on them.

*

They were on their way again to the Realm. In daylight and unencumbered, they quickly retraced their steps to the lookout where they had last stopped the night they returned, where they had viewed the chain of valleys housing their village. Seeing now so much that had been covered by darkness that night, the friends surveyed the changes since they last looked down from this vantage point in daylight, a century past. They wondered what giant metallic towers and hanging wires were for, noticing only how they cut up and fenced in the once open landscape. Only the terraced fields remained largely intact. Most of the flat fields and lower hills were now covered with new dwellings, some were so large and tall that they eclipsed the surrounding areas.

They examined the strange building that replaced the beloved Grand Hall, seeing a dark metal cross perched above the tall tower and the sprawling pale body covering the entire central hill, wondering what it was for. They watched once again the lines of people going to and fro along new streets, the comings and goings of boxes- and people-on-wheels. They were unsure how they would become part of that crowd in the coming years but were certain they would make the most of their freedom, while honouring and keeping alive memories of their loved ones.

They resumed their path to the Realm in silence. Their trip across the forest was as quick as it was sombre. So much of what had taken place when they were last coming through here returned to them. Neither could speak about it. It seemed so long ago, yet paradoxically, still painfully close. It was best to let the past sleep, Nguyễn decided. Besides, they might not return for a while. They might stay, as visiting guests perhaps, at the Realm for some time. They took two short breaks, and had finished their roasted peanuts and emptied all but one last water gourd, when they reached the final clearing before the entrance to the Realm. Nguyễn recognised it from the distinct stretch of barren ground slightly sloped down on the far side and flanked by splintery old trees.

Luru cut straight to the far edge of the clearing and headed to where they had found the path down to the waterfall. Nguyễn hurried to follow, noticing dry, rocky ground that did not match his memory of the sloping path and moist earth under lush canopy. Some distance down, he heard Luru rushing back.

‘It’s ... not here.’ Luru called out, distressed.

Nguyễn stared at Luru, not understanding. The path had disappeared, Luru explained. Luru insisted on showing him and took off. Nguyễn followed in dismay, stopping some steps away from where Luru was pacing in a small clearing ahead. Nguyễn recognised it now, this *was* where they had emerged from the path. He remembered veering away from the protruding root of an

old tree with a jagged hole in its side. There was no path behind it now, only a dense wall of old trees, some covered by vines. The ground around it was layered with rotten leaves and twigs, obviously undisturbed for a long time.

Nguyễn felt Luru's distress acutely, knowing his friend's burning wish to see Nga again. His longing to meet her would have been redoubled with his parents gone and no duties holding him back now in their homeland. Luru stood still, staring unseeingly at the green wall.

'I knew it,' said Luru, his voice breaking.

'What do you mean?'

'When we crossed this clearing, I looked back. The path had closed up behind us,' Luru sobbed.

Luru's face was haggard, his eyes were hollow. He had gotten so thin that every bone showed on his face. His Adam's apple lurched in his throat like a sharp stone, his collarbones stood out like bridges over sunken ground. *What do we do now?* Nguyễn wondered if the hundred years had included the time they were in the Realm. They would never know. It seemed Luru's hopes and dreams had ended there, the day they had left. He mourned for Luru's loss. Luru's happiness would have helped him, healing both their wounds.

I'm sorry Luru, so sorry.

I should have known.

How could you?

I had seen it, but refused to believe it.

You couldn't. No-one would! You wanted to go back.

I dreamt about it.

'Let's go,' Nguyễn said quietly.

Luru followed him silently. They left the clearing, then continued on the dusty path that led them back into the old forest.

*

It was mid-afternoon by the time they got back to their makeshift shelter, judging by the angle of the sun. They drained their last gourd of water, and without looking at one another, each curled up on the spot they had taken the previous night.

Heart sore and weary, Nguyễn tried to stall any thought or plan for the coming days. Luru's heartbreak had opened his wounds in strange, savage ways. He missed his fiancée, Hiền, with a fierce desire and anger that seemed to channel all his accumulated physical and mental suffering. Hot tears welled and spilled onto the warm grass beneath his face. He tried to keep still, for Luru's sake, but at the same time, he wished he could hug or shake his friend to break

them both away from this grief. He had not been sure of his role in the Realm, *if* it had worked out for Luru, but at the very least, his friend would have had real purpose to sustain himself in the days ahead. But it was not meant to be. Whatever it might take for their survival in the coming days, he vowed to be there for Luru.

*

They were caught in a wild flood that ripped chunks of the bank away and submerged everything in its path. Screams came from somewhere upstream, partly drowned away by the sound of roaring water and the ceaseless rain that came down in blinding, cold sheets. Nguyễn ran hard against the lashing rain and wind, unsure where Luru was in the chaos. He slipped on the wet mud and fell on his knees and elbows, pushed on the slippery ground and sprang forward again as soon as he could move.

The screams sounded closer but he still could not see much through the rain. The sky had darkened within minutes, and he strained to see what seemed to be a chain of people. Everyone was shouting; ‘hold’ and ‘grab’ were among the few words he could hear. He ran to the front of the line and understood: a man was holding a long stick pushed into the water, where there was one – no – *two*, black heads bobbing just beyond the reach of the stick. Behind the man was a line of people, each holding onto the person in front, around the waist or shoulder. But the bank under their feet had already broken away and they continued sliding forward.

Nguyễn was already in the water before he realised the raging current was not something humans could fight against. He pushed hard against the undercurrent but could close only a fraction of the gap between himself and the heads. He saw their faces now, a boy and a woman, their arms clinging to branches protruding from the bank. Fear and exhaustion in their eyes told him they could lose their hold any minute. He reached the boy first. The boy clambered onto Nguyễn’s head and forced it under the water for a moment. Nguyễn coughed and spluttered, having breathed in water through his mouth and nose. He blinked away the sharp pain that shot up his head from his nose cavity, while his ears filled with water. He held the boy above his head with one arm and reached for the woman with the other just as the branch broke away from her hand.

Weighed down and exhausted now, Nguyễn tried to calm the thrashing woman as they were washed further away from the bank. The screams and shouts from the bank sounded less distinct now, blended into the roaring of water and pounding rain. *It would have been easier to bring back two unconscious bodies. Please. Let us survive this.* He wasn’t sure who he was praying to. The woman kicked his ribs. Winded, he felt his arms sink. A wave passed over their heads. The boys’ arms and legs wrapped tightly around his head and neck like a giant octopus.

Nguyễn felt himself sinking and strove to push the woman above the water. Lightning slashed the dark sphere around them, followed immediately by a deafening thunderclap that echoed in his chest. He arched up, raising his head above the water for a gulp of fresh air just as a shadow drew near. Strong hands lifted him and his woman-and-boy load out of the water. *Luru!* An older, weathered Luru with a scar on his face had arrived on a leaf boat! With a supernatural strength, Luru lifted all three people into the boat at once.

*

‘No!’ Luru cried hoarsely. ‘I’m so sorry ...’

Nguyễn startled awake. He turned around, catching Luru curled up on the dry grass nearby, crying inconsolably.

‘Luru,’ Nguyễn shook him gently. ‘Luru!’ He called a little louder.

Luru mumbled unintelligibly, shivered and opened his eyes.

‘Are you all right?’

‘It was my fault ... I should’ve waited —’ Luru sobbed. ‘Everything’s burned ...’

‘What burned?’ Nguyễn peered into Luru’s distressed face.

‘The Hall,’ Luru gulped. ‘We should’ve waited until the incense had burned out ... this morning. It started a fire after ... we left.’

‘What?’ Nguyễn could make no sense out of that.

‘The village burned after we left the incense burning in the Hall, don’t you remember? So many people died. It was ... my fault —’ Luru buried his face in his hands.

Nguyễn remembered now. The morning they had come to the Hall to pray to the village guardians before their trip. They had left in a hurry, leaving the incense burning. But nothing *had* happened afterwards!

‘No, Luru!’ Nguyễn’s voice was firm. ‘There was no fire. We went hunting two days after. We walked past the Hall that night, remember?’ Nguyễn spoke louder, determined to break Luru out of his new nightmare.

‘No ... *fire?*’ Luru lifted his head slowly.

‘No. Fire.’ Nguyễn repeated each word firmly. ‘Not at the Hall. Not anywhere in the village.’ He watched warring emotions chasing one another across Luru’s face. ‘Nightmare?’ He instinctively lowered his voice to a soothing tone.

Luru looked away.

‘I’ve just had one, too,’ Nguyễn said gently, sitting down by his friend’s side. ‘Wild storm. *You* rescued me. Us. A woman and a boy.’ He breathed out, feeling a weight lifted from his chest.

Luru’s eyes were on the ground. Eventually his voice, low and hoarse, broke the silence. ‘Me? *Rescue* you?’ A faint smile came to his tear-stained face.

‘Yes. On a *leaf* boat!’ Nguyễn chuckled despite himself. ‘You lifted all of us out of the current at once.’

Luru laughed, wiping his eyes.

What has happened to us?

I’m sorry Luru. I don’t know. Maybe we’re just sorting through our pain. Our past.

*

Luru saw again what was in his dream: the Hall engulfed in great flames. The hill was too high to bring water up fast enough, people cried, tripped and fell on the slope. His lungs were bursting with heat and smoke. He tried to beat out the fire with a blanket and pulled people away from the flames. The heat increased, the roaring fire had drowned out other noises. When he looked back, the whole village was on fire. Each home was a bright ball, the centre was twisting, collapsing, crumbling into pieces. Smoke and ashes rose and filled the air, the sky was black with soot.

He ran down the main road: trees were burning like towering torches, exploding over roofs. The streets were strewn with injured and dead people. He dropped on his knees, having nothing to treat people with, or to relieve their pain, ease their passing. He searched instead for his mother, his father, his friends. Nguyễn. He found no-one he knew. *It was my fault.* His hands burned. He looked down. Two crooked fan-shaped frames on black stumps protruded from his wrists. He wrenched his mind away from the horror.

‘The Hall ... had gone, so had everyone...’ he choked.

‘Not our fault, Luru.’ Nguyễn spoke gently. ‘We went away. What happened to our village would have happened anyway, whether we were here or not’.

Luru swallowed. His eyes burned. *My parents’ last years ... My fault to urge you to go on this hunt.* He felt a bottomless remorse for his impulsive decision. He wanted to apologise to his best friend for all the pain and losses Nguyễn had endured, but the words died on his lips.

*

They ate their early evening meal of roasted sweet potatoes and red peppers and com lam, steamed rice roasted in bamboo pipes with a skewer each of grilled meat they had saved from the morning. Despite being cold, the food brought back memories of home food. After clearing things away, Luru took a walk alone and didn’t come back until the late moon had risen. Nguyễn

didn't want to sleep, partly to delay having to wrangle with strange dreams, but mostly to wait for Luru to come back. He understood his friend's need for time alone.

They were sitting apart now; each was lost in his own thinking. They had not spoken much since the afternoon, but Luru seemed almost himself during the meal. There were not many options for them in the days ahead, Nguyễn reflected. Despite having their papers, he knew the way it was with local people, it would be difficult to find work in established places without personal references. Nguyễn mulled over what would be the best, and worst, possible work they could find. He hoped his full strength would return soon for hard labour, if there were no vacancies in carpentry houses. He thought of looking for porters' jobs at the market or any shop requiring heavy lifting and carrying, seeing it would not matter for this kind of work what his background was, or whether he had references. He remembered the two stick-thin youths push-pulling a mountainous foreigner in a covered carriage. No. He felt the heat rise from his body to his face. *I'd rather be a beggar! No. Of course not a beggar.* He would contribute to the new community in any way he could, but would *not* serve foreigners or those working for them.

They were lying down now in their own spots again. Nguyễn hoped his friend would have a peaceful night. He wondered what Luru had seen in his latest nightmare that afternoon. He worried about Luru's uncontrollable distress and muddled state, so unlike the strong and clear-headed friend he had always known. He feared Luru's unrelenting burdens had been made worse by his guilt and regrets. Nguyễn looked up at the waning moon thinly veiled behind layers of pink-tinged haloes. He wondered if there would be rain tomorrow, recalling farmers' wisdom: *ráng vàng thì gió, ráng đỏ thì mưa*, golden haze means wind, red haze means rain.

'What would you like to do tomorrow?' Luru's clear voice came softly from behind him.

'I don't know ...' Nguyễn turned around, surprised. 'What do you think?'

Luru told him his plan. Nguyễn agreed. It was the obvious thing to do, yet he had not thought about it until hearing Luru outline his proposal.

Lying under the murky sky afterwards, with the moon now obscured under a thick bank of clouds, Nguyễn's spirit lifted from an unexpected heartwarming end to a difficult day, seeing Luru was himself once again and planning for what could be done. Nguyễn had never told his friend this, but he had always admired Luru's solutions to whatever situations they had to deal with. He realised with sudden clarity that the love for his best friend had always been grounded in unshakable trust and respect.

*

They were climbing the big guava tree in Nguyễn's garden. Two thirteen-year-old boys competing on who could pick more, and the best, of the luxuriant tree's peak season fruit. Luru

had disappeared into the thick canopy above Nguyễn, his voice came back among the fast rustling of parting branches, teasing Nguyễn about how his ‘ox-sized’ bulk must work harder to catch up. *Ha! You wait there, shrimp boy! We’ll see whose face is going fall!*

They were counting their pickings, the largest crop they had ever gathered. But it was strange, each time they finished counting, they had different numbers! They started again, then Luru laughed.

‘We’re idiots! We’ve been eating while counting!’

Nguyễn had laughed along, pleased to know that they had not been so stupid as to not count correctly. But again, only Luru worked out what they had done wrong. They had given up on that competition, challenging one another now who had picked the best, and largest fruit. It was difficult to judge from their selection, so they decided to ask sister Suong to help with the judging. Laying their best picks on the tray, Nguyễn suddenly realised there had been a mistake.

‘Wait!’ He called out to Luru, confused by the large, luscious pinkish-orange fruits with silvery fluff. ‘They’re *not* ... guavas!’

Luru looked at the tray. ‘You’re right. They’re Peaches of Longevity,’ he said airily.

‘What?’

*

Nguyễn woke up and smiled in the dark. *That* dream was part of a real memory. Sister Suong had picked out the best fruit from *his* pile, and shrimp boy Luru had to piggyback him around the garden as the first condition of the agreed prize. They had spent that afternoon carrying their large bags of guavas to share among the neighbours and his relatives, but Nguyễn had sent the winning fruit to Luru’s parents.

Nguyễn thought about his strange dreams and wondered what this new one meant. He had never been one to believe in dreams or even *remember* them, until very recently, but was glad to have remembered this so clearly because it brought back another long-forgotten memory. His sisters had sometimes talked about their dreams – most of the time they were lost on him – but he remembered once they had said something about fruits as good omens. *Fruitful, bearing fruits or even better, eating fruits, should indicate something good is coming up, don’t you think?* One of his sisters had said at the time and there was a positive consensus among the kitchen gathering. For the first time in his life, he held on to a superstitious belief. It was not a bad thing, after all, to hold on to hope. A little, even imagined, light is always welcome in unbreakable darkness. *Humph! He was turning into Luru.* He smiled.

Does he still have the stone of the Peach of Longevity we had brought back? He wondered if the fruit would grow in an entirely different climate. He made a note to ask Luru,

nevertheless, and already imagined his friend's laughing face when hearing his latest mangled dream.

Chapter 17: A Touch of Home

Nguyễn woke up at dawn but Luru had already gone. He chided himself for missing Luru again, who must have slipped quietly away to let him sleep a little longer. After a short walk, enjoying the mountain air and a quick wash to freshen up, Nguyễn returned to their shelter to see Luru walking energetically up the slope. It was good to see his friend, almost like the old days again with his bright eyes and cheerful face, although Luru was much thinner. Nguyễn wondered what was in the sack and smaller bags Luru was carrying.

‘Eat first!’ Luru ordered, opening one of the small bags.

Nguyễn’s stomach growled in anticipation when Luru passed him a freshly cooked bánh chung, its banana-leaf covers still warm. He yanked the lạt ties away, ripping the wet layers off in the shortest time he could manage. He sank his teeth into the sticky rice outer layer, right into the core of marinated meat and finely mashed bean. He had forgotten when he last ate bánh chung; didn’t expect to be so overwhelmed by its rich flavours and indescribable smell. Then he remembered. They had been unwrapping the treat on that fateful morning when they had taken a break by the pond, just before the girls from the Flower Valley arrived. They had enjoyed instead the freshly picked produce offered by the hostesses. It has come back full circle now, he thought.

Luru opened the large sack and passed Nguyễn a bundle tied with strings, then pulled another one out for himself. Nguyễn was surprised to find a blue-black shirt with pointy collar, a pair of dark trousers, and a sturdy pair of sandals. Luru’s bundle contained similar items except for a sand-coloured shirt.

‘We’ll need better clothing if we’re going to look for work,’ Luru said. ‘I asked the old couple I bought our food from yesterday to find us some clothing and some provisions. I wasn’t sure if we would return today, but there was no harm in planning ahead, don’t you think?’

Nguyễn couldn’t say anything to *that*. His faith in Luru was yet again validated. The clothes fitted them quite well, despite being slightly short on himself and a bit loose on them both. Luru joked that they would have room to grow. They stored away their scant provisions and washed their detention issued tunics and century-old pants, now their only change of clothes, and set out for the day.

*

Avoiding the central area, they took the shortest route towards Nguyễn’s home. Seeing the mass of the bamboo thicket just before the turn off to the large house, Luru’s heart contracted. So many happy memories of his time in Nguyễn’s home. He had always been included in Nguyễn’s

family activities, and any treat saved for the youngest boy by his parents or siblings had always come in two: one for Luru.

They passed Nguyễn's home and turned left, taking the narrow path further south to the old cemetery, now hemmed in on all sides by new buildings. They found Nguyễn's parents' graves. Luru waited for Nguyễn to finish his prayers, then paid his respects to Nguyễn's parents, remembering their love and inclusion that, over the years, had compensated for his loneliness as a single child. Then they looked around for Nguyễn's siblings' graves, finding only Long's and Suong's and two of his sisters', and paid their respects at these sites.

The friends took a while to find Luru's family cemetery. The long field had been fenced on all sides except for a narrow opening to a lane, clogged by weeds and vines. Luru entered the burial ground on shaky legs and followed his memory to the closest grave of his seven siblings. He stared at the tilting blank gravestone, suddenly remembering his strange waking-dream on the night of their return, when he had somehow visited the site but couldn't find any names on the empty gravemarkers. Still not comprehending this experience, he understood, nevertheless, the reason for the blank gravestones: there had been no-one left of his family to tend to the graves. A century of weather had erased any writing on the markers. He found three other graves but the remaining grave markers were flattened or removed from the field, overgrown with weeds and tall grass. Luru felt loss and panic at not being able to find his scattered family, distressed by the hopelessness of finding his parents' graves.

They found two isolated graves not far from his last sibling. One was covered in polished pink granite with a matching headstone. Luru remembered an occasion when his parents had discussed their funerals light-heartedly. His father had said something about making his mother's grave stand out for all times in pink granite. She had laughed and dismissed it as an unnecessary extravagance, insisting they should be settled together in the simplest arrangement, putting all their savings toward securing Luru's and his children's future. *Mother must have died before father did*, Luru realised with a stab to his heart; there would have been no pink granite otherwise. He dropped to his knees in front of the two now unnamed graves, knowing in his heart they must be his parents'. Luru's eyes blurred as he prayed silently to his parents, pleading for their forgiveness, guidance and protection for both himself and Nguyễn on their unknown paths ahead.

*

The friends parted at the turn off into town, promising to meet back at their shelter some time in the afternoon. It had been a strange and unexpectedly emotional day, Luru recalled as he returned first and waited for Nguyễn to come back from their first foray into applying for work. He had

walked from one unfamiliar street to another, seeing more new buildings everywhere, yet *not* seeing a single face he knew. The experience, so different from his growing up in this village, had been challenging and devastating in inexpressible ways.

It had been difficult for Luru to overcome his expectation of being warmly welcomed by villagers, wherever he went. That had been an ‘inheritance’ from his parents, hardworking and well respected members of the community. It was a strange kind of loss to be so alone now in a bustling place, where conversations only flowed one way. It was as if he was invisible.

Luru had enquired about job vacancies at two dispensaries, neither of which had existed in his time. One was a small, dark room at the far end of the market street that offered mostly pain reliever pads and herbal remedies for common ailments that people with little medicinal knowledge would have been able to manage. The young man at the counter seemed friendly but suggested that Luru come back three days later, when his uncle, the owner, would return from his trip. The second dispensary was a large, busy place that seemed more like a multi-purpose store, selling hats and scarves among assorted clothing items, household goods and a range of traditional and foreign medication. Luru had stood in the corner for a while, unable to approach any of the uniformed staff. He was relieved and dismayed at the same time by his invisibility in the bustling place.

Having worked up courage, thinking how strange that it was needed in this place and time, Luru had approached staff at the counter. A courteous and efficient young woman told him there might be a position available, but he would need to fill in some paperwork and register his details and credentials. He would then be called for an interview if his skills and experience were suitable. She handed him a stack of papers and sent him off with a smile. He had walked straight to their makeshift shelter before leafing through the foreign paperwork, realising there was no hope for him. He had wanted to find a position in any area that required reading and writing. He would have been more than happy to be a teacher, to work in schools or libraries, or as a scribe, if there was no vacancy in medical places. Now he sat still, shattered and disconsolate, knowing that his education in the ancient language and medical knowledge were obsolete in his occupied homeland.

Nguyễn returned and sat down quietly nearby. There was no need to ask, the look on his face told Luru that Nguyễn’s job-seeking venture was no better. It was late afternoon when Nguyễn suggested they go down the river to wash and get ready for an early night. A storm was coming.

*

It started to rain by the time they reached the river. Within minutes, it was pouring down in earnest. They were running away from the bank, when they heard screams from upstream. They raced towards the commotion, finding a cluster of people shouting by the shore, pointing into the churning water. They made out two – no, three – bobbing heads in the water; one clung to a partly submerged oar, two were hanging on to the same side of an upturned light boat. Nguyễn pulled off his clothes down to his old shorts and shoved the bundle of his only decent clothing into Luru's hand for safekeeping.

'Wait!' Luru called out, but Nguyễn had already dived into the river.

The raging current pulled Nguyễn and his targets further out from the bank, washing them downstream at the same time. Luru ran along the shore with the straggling group of men and women, trying to help but impeded by the cold, blinding rain.

'Ropes! Get some ropes!' Luru shouted above the roar of the water and hysterical voices.

Two figures darted away. Luru continued running along the bank, trying to keep track of Nguyễn and the two people left in the water. The person with the oar – it turned out to be a young man – made it to shore and was pulled to safety. But it seemed every time Nguyễn was about to reach the boat, it was dragged further away from his reach and the heads of the two people clinging to its side were now barely above the waterline. *Please! Let them survive.* Luru prayed fervently to whatever divine being might listen to his plea; his eyes stung with hot and cold water blurring them at the same time. Luru recalled Nguyễn's fragmented nightmare the previous day. It was uncannily similar to what they were facing now. Luru feared the dream was meant to forewarn them of the danger Nguyễn would be in. He was chilled with cold and dread.

Nguyễn reached the two endangered people and struggled to persuade them to let go of the boat. It would be impossible for him to drag ashore the damaged vessel, now sunken further, as well as two people, against the fast moving water. They let go of the boat and clung to Nguyễn. The three of them were heading to shore when the bank broke, sending chunks of soil and grass tumbling into the water, colliding with their faces.

'Nguyễn!' Luru screamed and lunged into the water, unable to see any heads now.

Someone ran after Luru, pulled him back. Rope! A man shouted and threw a knotted end into the water, but it didn't reach far enough. Nguyễn's and the other two bobbing heads appeared again among the debris. Luru ran up the bank, took off his outer clothes, left them together with Nguyễn's bundle and dived into the water. He held on to the rope and pushed with all his might against the turbulent current.

He couldn't get there fast enough. A big surge from upstream and the three heads disappeared under the water. *Nguyễn!* Luru's lungs were bursting. He was choking with water he

had breathed in through his mouth and nose, but he continued pushing forward. *Please!* The roaring water muffled his cries. With the next furious thrust, his hand grabbed hold of a small arm, a child's. Luru slid his hand under the child's chin, lifting the head above the water. Reaching across, he found Nguyễn's wrist and looped the rope around it.

They each caught the other's face amid the lashing rain and tumultuous water around them. Relief was all they could see before another wave washed over them. Luru felt the taut rope pulling them in now and worked in tandem with Nguyễn to move the four of them downstream with the current, while heading into shore. Time and again they went under large waves, avoiding debris but not always successful. Their arms and legs continued propelling them closer to the bank, with the help of people pulling the rope. By the time they reached solid ground, Luru's legs couldn't hold him up. He stumbled forward, fell on his elbows. Someone pulled him to safety. Then Nguyễn staggered up, supporting a limp woman in his arms, while the child, a boy, was carried to higher ground.

Someone sat down heavily beside Luru, followed by the sound of coughing and retching that he recognised as Nguyễn's. Luru's heart pounded with gladness and remnants of fear of the nearness of losing his friend. The rain eased as did the noises around them as people dispersed from the scene. Despite his desperate need to get back to their shelter – his teeth were chattering from the bone-deep cold – Luru's limbs felt at once heavy and limp.

'Come home with me.' An older's man voice came with a boney hand tapping Luru on the shoulder.

Luru struggled up and looked into the face of a man around his father's age, at the time Luru had left for the hunting trip. The man's eyes were regarding him warmly, and the look remained when he turned to Nguyễn. Nguyễn's lips were grey and his face smeared with mud, but his eyes were calm. Seeing the old man's kindly face, Luru felt a genuine connection and trust, but the sudden invitation confused him. The old man explained how his entire family was grateful to the friends for saving the boy, Tùng, his grandson, and his neighbour's daughter, Lý. The young woman had offered to accompany the boy back home in place of Tùng's mother, the man's daughter-in-law, who had remained in the next village to care for her sick mother.

The friends collected their muddy clothes and followed the old man. His home was on the northern end of the village. After washing and wrapping themselves in warm clothes lent by the old man's son, the friends gathered around the fire, drinking tea with the hospitable father and his two sons. The friends were soon invited to night rice. Once the whole family had settled around the large table, the old man introduced himself as Chính, two of his three sons as Luân and Phong, their wives as Hằng and Tiên. Tùng's father, Bảo, was away, as Chính explained, as

was the boy's mother, Hà. Seven grandchildren were also introduced. As the meal started, Lưu and Nguyễn once again savoured, each in his own way, the precious ritual of a family gathering around freshly cooked food at the dinner table. Lưu found for the first time since their return, memories of his family did not bring grief and a sense of loss, but a source of comfort. Nguyễn quietly appreciated the warm and easy interaction in this family and with their guests, reminding him of what he had known with his parents and siblings.

After dinner, while Nguyễn took up Phong's offer to play a game of Cờ Tướng, Chinese Chess, Lưu wandered into the study. Seeing Old Chính's grandson, Việt, struggling with the original script of *Hịch Tướng Sĩ*, The Entreaty to Servicemen by Trần Hưng Đạo, written just before the second Mongol invasion, Lưu volunteered to read the ancient script and translate it to help the boy. He took care to explain specific terms in the archaic language and their meanings in the context of thirteenth century Việt Nam. Spurred by the boy's interest, Lưu wrote some core words from the text and their common variations that could be used in different compound terms, as he had learned in his younger days.

The boy listened, fascinated, to the story of the life and work of Trần Hưng Đạo, who was born Prince Trần Quốc Tuấn and took the position of the Supreme Commander of the Great Việt army. Excelling in military skills as well as literary and history knowledge, the legendary prince had commanded his soldiers to defeat the Mongol's second and third invasions led by Emperor Kublai Khan and, later, his sons, Prince Toghan and Prince Ariq-Qaya. Learning that, at the time, the Mongol Empire had extended to a large part of Europe and most of the East, the boy's pride was palpable on hearing that the Mongolians were driven out of Vietnam for good at the end of the thirteenth century by this very same prince, who then retired to live out his days in his home village.

'The Entreaty must have had a considerable role in their success!' Việt insisted, understanding now the Prince's rousing call to action speech. The Supreme Commander's heart and mind had reached out to his soldiers, even as he had treated and shared all with them as equals.

'There's no doubt about it, my boy!'

Lưu had caught the boy's infectious excitement from the shared lesson. He could see himself in the boy, eager to learn more about their ancient history and culture. Việt's generation had been deprived of this knowledge by the obsolete language of the ancient scripts and by a foreign-regulated curriculum. Lưu felt a shared pride with the boy's family, seeing the youngster's passion for learning despite the effort of mastering a language no longer taught. Việt

asked Luru eagerly if he would be able to teach him more later on. Unable to dampen his spirits, Luru promised tentatively, not knowing what was coming in the days ahead.

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They gathered again afterwards around another teapot and the men brought out their pipes. Old Chính asked Luru and Nguyễn about their families, marvelled that the friends were by the river that afternoon, just as his grandson was coming back on the boat with his mother's friend, Lý. Luru was cautious, saying only that they came from a distant place, and that they both had ties in the local area, a long time in the past.

'You're young. Where and how did you learn the ancient script so well?' Old Chính asked Luru.

'I was taught by scholars, and learned from both of my parents,' Luru said carefully.

'It's rare nowadays to find people who can read or write the ancient script. Our generation was the last to have learned and retained some of it, but the Romanised chữ quốc ngữ has been the official language for decades now. Our old books are inaccessible to most youngsters and will soon be forgotten.' He sighed.

The old man turned to Nguyễn. 'How about you? What is your work?

'I was a carpenter before we travelled. I'm looking for the same work here, hopefully there will be some vacancy soon.'

'The scars on your back ... How did you get them?' Old Chính's direct gaze was inescapable. Nguyễn remembered seeing the old man stooping down beside them while they were recovering by the river.

'They were ... I got them accidentally, following some misunderstanding.' Nguyễn answered as best he could, unable to tell him more.

Old Chính spoke to them both.

'Both of you look young but also old in some ... exceptional ways. You have skills not usual for your age. You sound like us, yet different at the same time.' He paused, looking at each of them in turn. 'You can trust me. I'd like to help you in any way I can.'

The friends glanced at one another. Luru saw assent in Nguyễn's eyes. He took a deep breath and began.

'You may not believe what I'm going to tell you, but this is our true story. My name is Luru. I was born here. My parents' home was on the third rise ...'

The old man sat still. So did his sons, and grandsons, who joined them as the story began. They listened spellbound as Luru told them of their journey, their time in the Realm, their imprisonment and interrogation.

‘That was called a stingray whip, made from the creature’s preserved spine,’ Old Chính whispered. ‘Many have died from their wounds; others took a long time to recover, but all were scarred horribly. How could your scars heal so smoothly and look so ... *old*?’

‘We don’t know. We ate the Peach of Longevity when we were abroad and that was said to preserve health. Perhaps it helped to sustain and heal us during our days in detention. As for the scars ... something must have been infused in the gifts from the Mistress of the Cloud Castle and the medicated powder she packed for us,’ Luru suggested.

He told them the rest of their story. How they were released suddenly two days ago and had gone searching for the way back to the Valley but couldn’t find it. How they had looked for work earlier that day and come down for a wash just as the storm had broken.

‘I believe you,’ Old Chính said. ‘I heard of your story, growing up. I heard about two young men who left for a hunt but never returned. There were speculations about the curse on your family,’ he looked at Nguyễn. ‘But your siblings were adamant you would come back, having taken a protective amulet with you. Do you still have it?’

Nguyễn pulled the amulet out from under his shirt.

‘A hog tusk?’ The old man seemed surprised.

‘Yeah. For what it’s worth, protective or not, we survived the strangest journey and have returned, as my family wished,’ Nguyễn smiled enigmatically.

‘What are you going to do now?’

‘We don’t know yet. We must find work, but all we’ve got now are two pieces of paper with names issued by the release officers. We can’t even read them.’ Luru handed his paper over to the old man.

Old Chính scanned the paper and raised an eyebrow.

‘Lân? Trương Hồng Lâm? That’s not your name is it? It states here that you came from afar and lost all your possessions but have been allowed to seek work and register as a temporary resident of Tĩnh Vân.’

‘A *temporary* resident?’ Nguyễn was offended.

‘Better than being nameless and paperless.’ Luru poked his friend.

‘So what’s your name now?’ Old Chính asked Nguyễn.

Nguyễn pulled out his paper, transferred from his wet clothes into the borrowed shirt’s pocket.

‘Từ Minh Quỳ?’ Old Chính read aloud.

Nguyễn was aghast. ‘That’s my new name?’

‘Nguyễn, Quỳn, they sound similar enough.’ Luru grinned. ‘I can see how they’ve ‘translated’ your original name to this new one, turning your family name from Tà to Từ, retaining your father’s middle name in it as well.’

‘What about your real name?’ Old Chính asked Luru.

‘Trần Phúc Luru,’ he said. It felt strange to speak his name aloud again that brought back unwanted memories of the times he had stated his name in the detention centre. But he felt at home now among these men, it was good to hear his birth name once again.

‘Phúc Luru ... Continued Blessing. Such a good name, your parents must have chosen it for a good reason. Ah, Trần ... Trương, Luru ... Lân, I can see the connections,’ the old man nodded. ‘But Lân? A mythical creature? I guess you are one, in a sense, my lad,’ he chuckled.

Luru thought of Lân, the half-dragon, half-tiger creature, one of the four mythical beings from ancient belief, who could commute between heaven and earth. Lân was believed to have supernatural powers to guard the spiritual realm, appearing in temples’ entrances and on roofs, reigning on pedestals by stone plaques bearing scholars’ names, or as keepers of Buddhist tomes, representing intellectual strength and clarity. Luru laughed inwardly at his own inadequacy and wondered about the curious choice by the officers for his new identity.

‘That’s settled then,’ Old Chính declared. ‘Tomorrow I will register you both with the local authorities. I will tell them you’re visiting family friends and will stay with us while looking for work. In the meantime, Luru can teach my grandchildren. I expect you will soon have more students from families who have been trying – discreetly and with difficulty – to help their children learn the traditional script. As for Nguyễn, I will write you a personal reference and ask for vacancies in local carpentries on your behalf. If you like, you both can help us in the orchards.’ He looked from one guest to the other, pleased at the young men’s happy faces.

‘Thank you,’ Luru said, overwhelmed.

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They were in bed now. Lying in the dark, Luru recalled fragments of the strange day, seeing major events flow into one another like distinct dyes in a continuous length of silk. He remembered their setting out early from the mountain, not knowing how their first attempt at integrating into the new life would unfold, arriving at unexpected discoveries in the cemeteries. Their failing to find work and being caught in the storm, he reflected, had elements of Nguyễn’s bizarre dream the previous day. He was glad about how the day had ended, which was beyond their imagination. But glad was not a sufficient description for his feeling now. Perhaps *glad* with ten times the concentration. He was thinking in terms of medical doses: reduce the liquid

until only the thickest substance remains. He smiled in the dark. It had been a long time since he last had the luxury of peaceful reflection in bed.

He turned over, took in the fresh smell of lemongrass and gleditsia from his pillow, just how it had been at home. He remembered the same smells from the clothes and towels his mother had rinsed in water infused with the plants' leaves and pods, recalled the fragrance of orange blossoms in his mother's hairwash. They were the sum of love, security and comfort in his childhood. They had remained, among specific fragrances, a sensory identification of home, undimmed by the passage of time.

Drifting into sleep, Luru remembered his precious learning time with his father, who had listened to him reading from ancient script with pride. He recalled the lesson that night about the historical battle on Bạch Đằng river, commanded by Trần Hưng Đạo in 1288. He had admired the planning and ingenious strategies employed by the Supreme Commander that had secured the local army's victory against the fierce and much larger troops of the invaders. They had finally driven the Mongols out of the country and restored independence that was still enjoyed five centuries later. He remembered that night with his parents; their excited discussion of the momentous victory had concluded with a celebration – homemade treats and the opening of a bottle of preserved rare roots saved for special occasions.

Chapter 18: A New Beginning

They woke up when it was still dark, shared the morning rice with the family and joined the men in the orchards. During a break, Nguyễn told Luru of a strange dream he had overnight about their visiting the orchards in the Realm's Middle Plain, which had turned into local fields where they were working among Old Chính's sons, just as they had been that morning. Nguyễn also shared with him another peculiar dream he had had on their last night on the mountain that started with their counting of guavas – Luru still remembered that long-ago afternoon – but Nguyễn told him that his dream had ended with a tray of Peaches of Longevity. The friends laughed at Nguyễn's mangled dreams and wondered at the odd coincidence of his late sister's 'interpretation' of 'fruitful' dreams and their actual work picking fruit in the orchards. They planned to retrieve their packs soon from their makeshift shelter, and would ask Old Chính for a spot in the family orchard to plant the Peach of Longevity's seed, along with seeds of medicinal herbs they had brought back.

After the midday rice, Luru was asked to take a break from the heat and teach Old Chính's grandchildren after their noon nap, while the grandfather took Nguyễn to visit some local carpentries for work. Luru enjoyed his time among the children, aged seven to sixteen, teaching them to read and write the ancient script at different levels. He also learned from the oldest two, afterward, about the arrival of the foreigners. French people, they were called. They had arrived more than half a century earlier and imposed many changes, not least of which was the abolition of the traditional language and the implementation of chữ quốc ngữ, based on the Roman Alphabet, with added accents to accommodate the local tongue. It was his time to learn the new national script from the children. It was the only way their ancient culture and traditions could be carried forward.

The family gathered again at night rice and shared the progress of the day. While the children and Luru had very much enjoyed their learning time, Nguyễn's afternoon had been less rewarding. One owner offered him minor work that involved sharpening tools and helping loading and unloading timber. Nguyễn had accepted his offer but was disappointed that he would not, at least in the near future, be doing what he loved most and was best at: making and carving furniture. He told the family how he had enjoyed working in the orchards and had decided to divide his time between the two jobs, hoping for opportunities to make use of his carpentry skills and experience in the future.

Bảo, father of the rescued boy, Tùng, returned from his trip a few days later, bringing with him news and information from afar. Accompanying their cargoes of fruit to major cities along the railway line, he had picked up, among gifts for every member of the family, strange tales and developments in the people's resistance movement. He shared his news in hushed tones among the men as they gathered around a pot of tea. Hearing Luru and Nguyễn's story, retold by his father, Bảo's eyes flashed with anger at their treatment by locals and foreigners alike.

'It's important that you remember your new names and answer to them promptly,' he cautioned.

Bảo shared stories of sudden arrests and disappearances, in the past and recently, hopeful that the family could shield the two young men from prying eyes. It was then the friends learned that every household must report to the local authorities *any* arrival or departure from their address, *including* family members. This had to be done even for short visits or absences, followed by immediate updates of any change to the number of people housed. It was important to safeguard against random checks that would result in unregistered people being arrested.

It was not uncommon for detained people to be whipped or subjected to physical punishments, the oldest brother, Luận, asserted, but it was unusual *if* the friends had been released based only on Nguyễn's great-nephew's testimony. There might have been something else at play, they all agreed, special connections or bribery were not ruled out, but it was a mystery they might never find out. It was fortunate that their family's orchards had been operating with a regular turnover of staff, both long-term and temporary; the friends' appearance would not be deemed unusual. But they all urged Luru and Nguyễn to be vigilant and offered to fill them in on essential *đường đi nước bước*, ways and strategies, to best avoid attracting unwanted attention.

'Carry your papers with you always, and don't raise any suspicion about your identities or anything from your past,' Old Chính reminded them.

First and foremost, the father and sons decided, the friends must familiarise themselves with new living conditions. They must learn how to handle the French-issued currency, the piastre, whose numbers and letters were entirely different from the old coins. They must also learn basic reading and writing skills, even if only to register their names at official places, and must learn to address correctly different levels of officers, both local and foreign.

Bảo told them of a strong demand for able-bodied young men to work in the country's largest coal mines in Quảng Ninh, where he had stayed with friends for a few days. He had observed the inflow of new arrivals was largest in mining towns. These were also the only places where local authorities were less concerned with strangers' backgrounds, as long as they carried their papers. Driven by insatiable demands for coal and the booming export trade, the French had

been continuously expanding established mines, as well as opening new ones in the area, since their exploitation began in the late nineteenth century.

Nguyễn listened intently to Bảo talking. His eyes shone on hearing there was readily available work at the mines, and asked Bảo to tell them more about it. Luru was concerned but not surprised to hear that, despite being better paid than in other jobs, miners had been in high demand. The large turnover of miners was due to the long hours underground, harsh conditions and high rates of illness and injury. From time to time, work-related fatalities had resulted from brutal treatment of workers at the hands of foremen, or from preventable accidents that had been ignored by owners. Nguyễn stayed quiet for the remainder of the night, but Luru sensed his friend was contemplating this new possibility for work and he was determined to talk Nguyễn out of it.

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The friends were taking a break in a corner of the orchard, just after planting the Peach of Longevity seed, along with seeds of medicinal plants from the rosewood box, when Nguyễn told Luru he had made up his mind. He would leave for Quảng Ninh and work in the mines for a while.

‘I’ve thought hard about it,’ Nguyễn said calmly to Luru, who was appalled. ‘There’s no real work for me here. A twelve-year-old boy could do what I’ve been given at the carpentry. Although I’ve enjoyed working in the orchards, I’m neither family nor staff. It might prove difficult to allocate shifts for me on the roster, particularly with my irregular job outside.’

‘But Nguyễn ...’ Luru’s voice rose.

‘I know you’re worrying about illnesses and injuries. I’ll be careful and will only work for a while, save up enough to buy us a place, build a house — ’

‘We can do it here! Why risk your life with a mining job?’

‘I’m not. Besides, I won’t be able to do that alone. We each will work and meet up regularly. As soon as we’ve earned enough to strike out on our own, I’ll set up a carpenter’s workshop at home and a teaching space or rooms where you can help people with your medical knowledge. We can do it!’

Luru’s heart sank. Hearing Nguyễn planning to move away to work in the mines grieved him. There had never been a time that his best friend would consider doing *anything* without him, especially if it had involved travelling or any new venture. Yet times had changed. They had both been through unimaginable trials and losses, but were still standing, planning for their future, although they must live apart for a while. They might survive their new challenges yet.

Luru wanted so much to dissuade Nguyễn from taking a dangerous job so far away. He imagined the suffocating darkness that miners were subjected to throughout their days, the black dust they took in with their every breath. He had already anticipated Nguyễn's suffering, knowing how much his friend loved to be outside; he *thirsted* for mountain air. Luru blocked away thoughts of injury and illness. It was too much to worry about his friend's safety as well as missing him – badly – already.

Nguyễn was yet to regain his build and robustness but there was no mistaking his strength and capability. He looked older now, with a touch of grey above his temples. His bright eyes, always clear and vivid conveyors of his emotions, were calm now, taking in the tranquil field around them in the softening light. Luru understood no attempt at dissuasion would change Nguyễn's mind. This was the one time they must agree to approach new ventures differently.

Luru searched in his pack and handed Nguyễn a silk pouch.

'What's this?' Nguyễn asked, opening the pouch and lifting up a gold chain carrying a jade Boddhisattva statue. 'I can't possibly —'

'Please, keep it for me,' Luru pleaded.

'No! It was your mother's gift!' Nguyễn rewrapped it hastily and pushed it back. 'I've got ... this.' He fumbled and pulled out his great-grandfather's amulet from under his shirt. 'I'm protected, remember?' He grinned, his white teeth shone against the darkly tanned face.

'That's for your living ... money.' Luru pressed the gift into Nguyễn's hand, closing his fingers around it. 'Not for *protection*, you fool!' He smiled at Nguyễn's perplexed face. 'It will fetch a good price. Keep it in case you can't find work right away.'

Nguyễn refused the precious gift, but Luru had another plan. He told Nguyễn how he had almost forgotten about the jade Boddhisattava statue until the first morning they woke up on the mountain. It was the only thing worth enough money for food *and* some clothing, so he had dug it out from where he had deposited it in a secret pocket his mother had sewn into his pack. There, he had found yet *another* silk pouch. The other contained his sixteenth birthday gift: a gold-trimmed jade washer, symbolising protection and prosperity, his parents' wish for him for a lifetime. Luru had found an older couple whom he trusted to exchange the precious gift for current money. They had helped him buy food and new clothes. Luru had tried giving the remaining money to Hằng, the oldest sister-in-law, who oversaw the running of Old Chính's family, for the friends' share of food and expenses, but neither Hằng nor Luân, her husband, would take it; neither would Old Chính or Phong. They had all insisted that the friends were now

family members. Now Luru pulled out a small package wrapped in a brown cloth, revealing bundles of notes in different colours.

‘You keep this now for food and essential things once you’re there.’ Luru passed the package to Nguyễn. ‘There should be enough until your first month’s pay.’

Nguyễn was lost for words. He had known Luru all his life, yet his friend had never stopped surprising him. He had wondered about the hot food and the clothes Luru had bought, but they had not yet had a chance to talk about *anything* much after Luru’s crushing loss when they were unable to find the way back to the Realm. Since their arrival at Old Chính’s home, they had barely any time alone. Once again, Luru’s forethought had proven to be the very thing necessary for Nguyễn to overcome the only obstacle to his plan. Now he could buy a train ticket and survive until his first pay.

‘Thank you,’ Nguyễn said simply, grateful for Luru’s support. He divided the pile of notes into two roughly equal halves, handing Luru one. ‘Keep this for later.’ He was adamant that Luru must not part with his mother’s gift, argued reasonably that where he was going, it might be a risk carrying valuable things. ‘Keep it close, mummy’s boy!’ he teased, as if they were little boys again.

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They were waiting on the platform for the train taking Nguyễn from Lào Cai to Hà Nội, and from there, another train to Quảng Ninh. They had heard much about the enormous metal ‘beast’ with long carriages connected together, capable of carrying hundreds of people and cargoes. Luru had been observing another train arriving earlier; it was now resting like a giant rectangular snake. He was wondering what immense forces were employed to start, let alone pull, these huge loads over long distances. He imagined hundreds of horses harnessed at its head, yet doubted they would be able to deliver the same power. He remembered studying closely the working of the flameless lamp in Old Chính’s home, he had marvelled at the human ingenuity that had gone into the clean and efficient appliance, just as had marvelled at the man-on-wheels – bicycles, they were called – among many other strange devices introduced into their homeland by the foreigners. There is much we could learn from them, he concluded, but on our own terms and *not* at the expense of our freedom and autonomy.

He recalled Việt’s excitement the previous night on learning Trần Hưng Đạo’s *Binh Thư Yếu Lược*, Principles of Military Strategy. The four-volume tome was informed by the Supreme Commander’s expansive knowledge of Ancient History and Military Arts that were instrumental to his coordinating land and naval forces that had driven the Mongol armies out of the country. The boy was determined to learn all he could from past successes.

‘History will repeat itself, won’t it?’ Việt had announced, rather than asked.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Century after century, we have driven out the invaders,’ the boy observed. ‘We will drive the French out, too, eventually, don’t you think?’

‘I hope so, my boy. I think so,’ Luru agreed.

Việt had gone on telling him what he knew about the local’s resistance force, outlining notable activities since the French invaded the country. Luru had learned from Việt about the Yên Thế Insurrection in the late nineteenth century, when the rebel force had attacked the railway, captured trains and an officer for ransom, so that the French had to make peace and grant the leader, Hoàng Hoa Thám, a regional fiefdom. This had enabled the leader, known as the ‘Tiger of Yên Thế’, to maintain the rebel stronghold over his 25-year campaign against French rule; but he was betrayed and killed in 1913 by a spy and his supporters were all executed as ‘bandits’ by the French. Việt also mentioned other attempts to overthrow the oppressors by different resistance groups, naming the Duy Tân Hội, Reformation Society, founded in the mid-1910s by a scholar, Phan Bội Châu, who led a ‘restoration army’ joined by people from all classes. His books had had strong impact on people, rousing nationalist fervour in the country, but their uprising in 1917 also failed, the leader was captured and had been confined in house arrest.

The most recent, and largest attempt at an uprising, Việt said, had been coordinated by the Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng, Vietnamese Nationalist Party, led by Nguyễn Thái Học since 1927. The twenty-three-year old teacher and revolutionary had planned a large force in the Yên Bái uprising that had involved twelve districts from Hà Nội to the western highlands and eastern regions; but it was disrupted and the leader, along with dozens of other members, were arrested and killed by the French.

Việt told Luru how he wanted to learn all he could from their ancient history and military successes, so he could adapt strategies from the past to contribute to the fight against the French, wishing first he could join the resistance army. His biggest challenge was, Việt admitted, to convince his mother. There would be ‘no problem’ with his father, Bảo, who let his oldest son sit in on their discussions, and likely would soon allow him to attend secret meetings. Luru was surprised to hear this, thinking how dangerous it would be for youngsters to participate in such operations. Then he realised Việt was not much younger than himself and Nguyễn, when they had embarked on their dangerous trip. *This* was far more worthy to risk their lives for, he reflected; but he could not help remembering their harrowing time in detention. He could not compare their experiences on facing the fierce animals, the tiger and wild hog, to facing local mandarins and foreign officers commanding the black-clad silent torturers. He believed the scars

he and Nguyễn carried, on their bodies and in their minds, were unlikely to fade with time. He only prayed that Việt would never have to face what they had faced.

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Nguyễn returned from his brief inspection of various stalls on the station, carrying two steaming cups of tea and an assortment of treats. There was not much time left, but the friends enjoyed the treats and finished their tea just as the announcement from the loudspeaker called for Hà Nội-bound passengers to board their train.

The friends hugged each other. It was too soon for Luru to fully grasp that Nguyễn was leaving, starting a new journey without him. Suddenly there were so many things he wanted to say but couldn't. It was hard to say goodbye. As far as they could remember, there had not been a day thus far they had not seen one another.

'Take care,' Luru said, pushing down a lump in his throat. 'Keep out of trouble, won't you?'

'Look who's talking,' Nguyễn scoffed. 'I'll be back as soon as I can,' he promised. 'Get yourself a wife in your free time. She'll keep you in place and out of mischief.' He slapped Luru on the back.

'You'll get one before me,' Luru retorted, remembered how his strapping handsome friend had invariably set groups of girls aflutter and brought colour to their cheeks just with his appearance.

'Among the soot-covered scarecrows in the mines,' Nguyễn laughed and mounted the steps.

'Keep that temper down, and remember your name,' Luru called after him.

'Which one?' Nguyễn disappeared into the cabin, appearing again at a window, smiling and waving as the train hooted and clanged its way out of the station.

Nguyễn was just as Luru remembered the morning they had visited the Hall at sunrise before they went away. *No matter what name strangers have given you and whatever foolish names I've called you, there will always be only one name that comes with your face, dearest friend. No matter how we were robbed of our past and forced to adopt new identities, they will never take away who we have been and continue to be.*

Alone on the station, Luru had already discovered a new kind of loss. It was like losing the function of a limb, as he had when he fell into the pit in his childhood. The broken arm had compromised his balance and coordination for some moons; he felt like that now that Nguyễn was gone. Nguyễn's straight and true nature and wry humour had never failed to make his days better. Time and again Nguyễn had risked his life and limbs for others. Luru wondered if he

deserved such a loyal and loving friend. He had never admitted, but always known in his heart, that he would have perished at the bottom of the pit that autumn night if it had not been for Nguyễn's faith and perseverance. He flinched at the memory of Nguyễn throwing himself into the path of the serrated whip that had left a groove across his back. From Nguyễn he had learnt to find his own strength and endurance. He had always been grateful for having Nguyễn in his life, but had never told his friend.

Nguyễn looked back at Luru's figure on the platform, getting smaller and smaller, soon disappearing. His hand instinctively went to his chest. He could feel the amulet under his shirt. It wasn't the family relic that had saved him. Luru had. Luru had thrown himself at the tiger and thwarted its attack. *Shrimp boy*, he had called Luru from time to time, but he had never told Luru how he had wished his muscles could match the mental strength his friend possessed. At thirteen, Luru had carried him home from the mountain after he had suffered a concussion and a cut to his head from falling onto a rock, while they were gathering firewood. Luru had taken off his own tunic to bandage Nguyễn's head and carried him home, a bulk almost twice his size. Luru would not leave him unattended. Nguyễn had woken up along the way but had no strength to move; Luru had continued on until they were home. The adults had wondered how Luru could have managed that. Nguyễn knew.

Nguyễn recalled how, despite his dislike of cold water and fear of fast currents, Luru had jumped into the raging river in the middle of a storm to save him. His quiet, gentle friend had stood by him against bullies, year after year, and against Bách until the day they had left. Luru's steadfast heart had been Nguyễn's *protection*. Luru had been a brother, whose strength and wisdom had protected him in ways that his oldest brother, Long, nearly twenty years his senior, had never been able, for Long had always been occupied with grown-up's responsibilities. Luru's preparedness and foresight had inspired Nguyễn more than he had the words to say.

Nguyễn put away his laden pack and thought about his last week among the people now closest to him. From Old Chính to all his sons and their wives, everyone had tried to dissuade him from working in the mines. Old Chính and his sons had reaffirmed Luru and Nguyễn as their new sons and brothers. Meeting Nguyễn's determination, their attention had turned into practical preparation for his trip. Within days, he had new clothes made by his adoptive sisters, who had also packed him fresh and long-life food, along with gifts from family members to ensure his basic needs were met in his early days of living away.

Bảo had given him a case of fruit and a detailed map to his friend's place, not far from the train station. Delivering the fruit box would not attract any special attention, but this very specific arrangement, a secret code between trusted friends, would see Nguyễn welcomed

without prior introduction. Bảo's letter would ensure his place as a special guest in Trọng's home, and Trọng would do everything in his ability to help him find work and navigate his new environment safely.

There were other messages that he was to deliver, verbally, of great importance to many people: arrangements for their network of resistance. The brothers had been involved in supporting and carrying messages during Bảo's fruit-delivering trips between miners and highlanders in different regions. This had been instrumental in consolidating the groups' strength, as well as coordinating progress and needs from each area. Knowing Nguyễn's and Lư's backgrounds, the father and sons knew they could trust the friends with the secret operation.

'How did our people's previous attempts at uprising go?' Nguyễn had asked.

'There were some successes,' Bảo said, 'but coordinating a large number of people living in different areas has been difficult. Besides the practicalities of maintaining communication and sharing resources between regions, there have always been delays and, at times, interceptions by police. There have also been unexpected developments that have undone our collective effort.'

Bảo had gone on telling them about a number of campaigns that were crushed by betrayals, while the latest and largest simultaneous uprising planned by the Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng, the Vietnamese Nationalist Party, was thrown into disarray when its members had acted on impulse and assassinated Alfred Bazin, the 'yellow-slave trader', who recruited poor locals through beating or coercion, then sold them to French-owned plantations. This unapproved attack on the Frenchman had brought severe retribution by the French authorities. As a result, the leader of the Party, Nguyễn Thái Học, along with members of the leadership team, had been captured and executed earlier that year, with hundreds of supporters arrested and detained in French-built prisons.

The friends' eyes had been opened to the scale of oppression and hardships their people had been suffering, and also to the need to continue, in whatever capacity they could, to contribute to the ongoing struggle for freedom. Luận had added to his brother's recounting, telling them some success stories, as well as survival tales of prisoners. Through his stories, the friends had learned about Hoà Lò, The Oven, the largest French-made prison in the country in the capital city, Hà Nội, where most Nationalist Party members were held before their execution by the guillotine. Survivors from that very place had told of the stingray whips among horrendous torture devices employed by the French in their bid to extract information from prisoners.

Nguyễn thought of the secret messages that had been entrusted to him: names of people and places, vital information for the planning of the largest yet uprising in the region. He prayed that he would not be captured. He had not yet said anything about joining the resistance, but in his heart, he already knew that, sooner or later, he would.

‘Please don’t do anything without me,’ Luru had pleaded the night before Nguyễn had left, as they were getting ready for bed.

The silence between them was hard. Luru knew. He feared. There was no *safe* way to join the resistance.

But we must.

Not while we’re apart!

It won’t wait for us to be ready. We never will be.

Here or there?

Depends.

Okay. Let me know.

*

Nguyễn was now looking out the window, observing for the first time the breathtaking views from the train crossing the highland. He had never been this far from Tĩnh Vân, and wondered if Luru had seen the land like this in his trips away with his parents. The tall towers and black roads crisscrossing the farmlands would not have been there then. He pushed away fragments of new, disturbing dreams from the previous night, but could not ignore the strong mixture of emotions provoked by Bảo’s stories of revolution. He recalled how the term ‘yellow-slave’ had brought back vivid images of two stick-thin youths pushing a covered carriage under the beating down sun. He knew the stories would have affected Luru in similar ways, bringing back memories that were still raw for them both, but he hoped his friend would soon find healing through his interaction with others. He knew Luru was valued and respected, already invited to teach youngsters in the family circles. If he was not mistaken, Luru would soon be invited to secret meetings, where he would rise to become a leader given his strength in analytical skills and strategy. He worried less for his friend’s capability, more for the uncertainty of resistance with so many risks to consider, now they were also living apart.

He suddenly remembered a story told by his brother, Long, during his last night rice before they went away. Long had told to him that their great-grandfather, the hunter whose amulet he had inherited, had had a best friend, Trần Đức Lương. He was a scholar, a poet and also a medical man. It was well known that the friends were inseparable. Both had survived their wives for hundreds of moons, yet their great-grandfather had died within the same moon

following his best friend's death. Long had remarked on the strange coincidence that, beside their similar-sounding given names, Luru also shared the late scholar's surname. Long had teased Nguyễn, saying that perhaps he had 'inherited' such a famous friendship, joking that, *if* this was true, Luru and Nguyễn were going to have long, unordinary lives with many events to share. Nguyễn had been surprised on hearing this.

I'll tell Luru this next time we meet. Nguyễn wondered what his friend would make of it. His heart lifted at the thought of seeing his friend again, soon.

*

I'll go to Quảng Ninh for a surprise visit next moon. Luru stopped at the top of the hill, looking over his new home's orchards. He imagined Nguyễn's face and felt his heart lifted. He would see his friend again, soon.

An owl hooted and flew past Luru into a mass of tall trees by the roadside. 'Bearers of ill news,' his people called the mournful nocturnal birds. An owl had flown past him in his back garden the night before he and Nguyễn had embarked on the hunting trip. Luru had kept this to himself, and had forgotten about it. Until now.

Luru wondered how much of what they planned this time would eventuate, and whether they would again arrive at someplace they had never been.

'History will repeat itself', Việt's voice echoed in Luru's mind. He pushed the memory away, along with strange, suffocating dreams of black rooms and wriggling through a tight tunnel that he did not want to remember nor analyse.

I would go through anything with Nguyễn. Luru was certain of it, but he was now unsure of where and when they would next meet.

The embers of time had already started some obscured fires. Neither of the friends had known their new journey had already begun.